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BONUS VERSION

COMPOSING THE PHOTO

CREATING ORDER FROM THE CHAOS - TREY RATCLIFF

Unique photography for unique people

STUCK IN CUSTOMS

Trey Ratcliff

A STUCK IN CUSTOMS PRODUCT

FLATBOOKS

INTERESTING CONTENT FOR INTERESTING PEOPLE

COMPOSING THE PHOTO - FIRST EDITION

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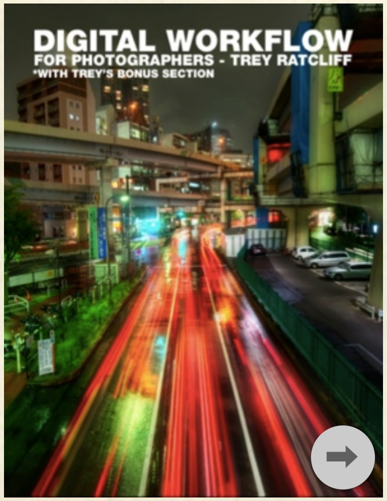
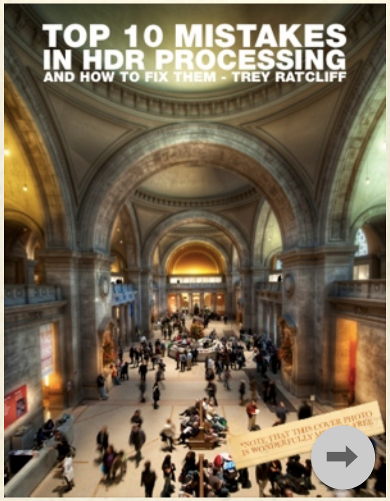


DIGITAL WORKFLOW
FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS - TREY RATCLIFF
*WITH TREY'S BONUS SECTION



TOP 10 MISTAKES
IN HDR PROCESSING
AND HOW TO FIX THEM - TREY RATCLIFF

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COMPOSING ON COMPOSITION

I have often said in interviews and "on the record" that teaching composition is very difficult. So, I've set out quite the challenge for myself here!

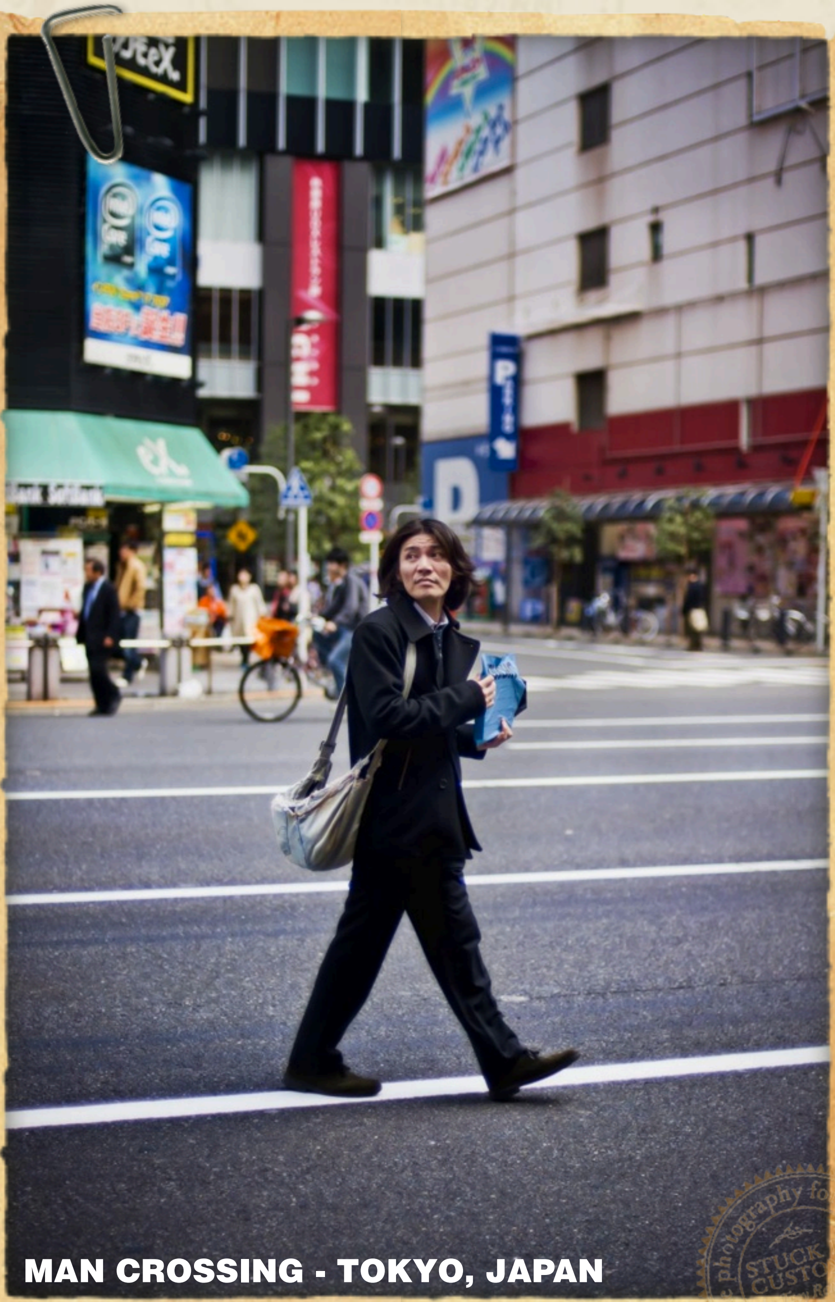
It is my goal that you come away from this eBook with many new viewpoints and opinions on how to better compose an image. I will be happy if you take a few of your new lessons learned and begin applying them immediately. Throughout the text, I'll do my best to have many golden nuggets of truth that you can revisit from time to time as gentle reminders.

I sometimes equate learning composition to learning a golf swing. I notice that people that have a good golf swing (not me) whisper little reminders to themselves from time to time. They practice here and there, even when they are not holding a golf club! Like Buddhists, they chant mantras like, "Cock your wrist here," and, "Shift weight to left leg," et cetera.

We should try to achieve the same goal with composition. I want you thinking about it all the time, even when you are not holding a camera. Because, let's face it, MOST of the time you are not holding a camera, but you are seeing interesting things. As a photographer, you are probably already noticing little bits here or there. (BTW, don't you feel sorry for non-photographers who can look at a salt shaker, and all they see is a salt shaker? They don't see it in relation to the pepper shaker, its distance from the edge of the table, and the soft lights behind the salt shaker.)

While you are going about your normal life and noticing these wonderful little bits, think about composing them for a photo. Repeat little composition-mantras over and over as you consider the subject matter. If you repeat this over and over again for a few weeks, it will become almost automatic when you pick up your camera. Even better, you will start to make "a little game" out of things you are seeing every day. It will add a nice layer to your increasingly artistic life, won't it?

PASSPORT
United States of America



MAN CROSSING - TOKYO, JAPAN

A well-composed photo has a poetic balance. It lets the viewer feel naturally at ease with the photo. The feeling is one of perfection, as if that one moment on Earth was special, and it was captured in the absolute perfect manner.

TRAINING THE MIND

The neat thing about the human mind is its ability to envision many possible futures. Depending on how you are able to master this, you can choose one of those futures to live in. This is actually a wonderful secret of life, and maybe this little exercise in composing photos will give some indication of that.

By simulating the real world over and over again in your mind, you can start to manipulate things you thought once out of your control. If you look at great people in the world that perform a certain set of tasks with amazing alacrity and poise, you might assume it is a "natural talent." What you are seeing is simply the tip of the iceberg. For every action you see, there are thousands of "simulated" actions in their mind between the physical actions.

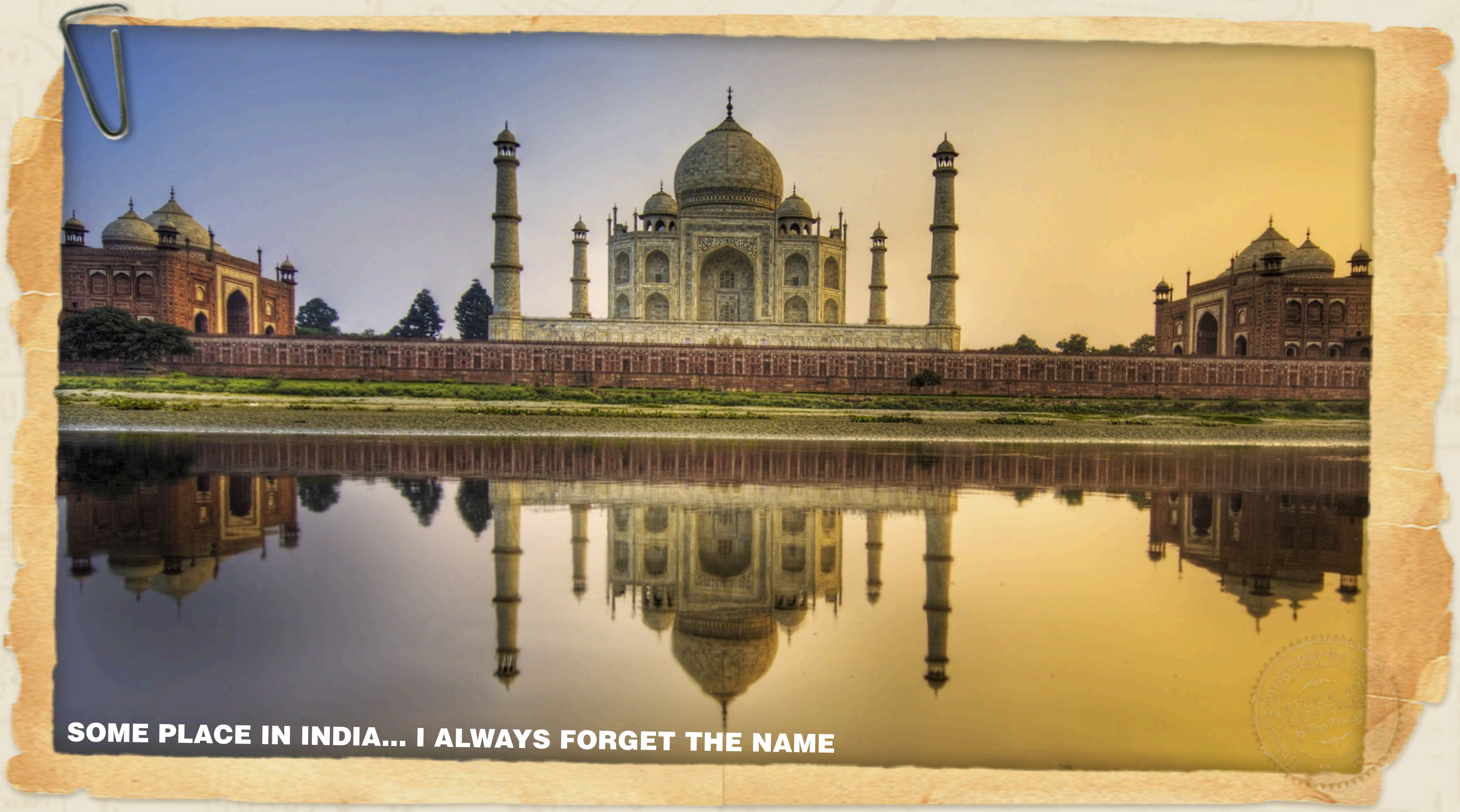
CARE TO JOIN ME FOR A DRINK? PALM BEACH

THE DIRT ROAD TO THE NUCLEAR BLAST SITE, YELLOWSTONE

Obviously, by reading this eBook, you are not intellectually lazy, and you are able to keep many concepts playing in concert in your mind at the same time. This will introduce another layer of thinking to add onto your already active mind. There is no room for intellectual laziness. Leave that to the slackers out there who find it easier to be lackadaisical rather than fully focused on ideas of consequence.

GOLDEN NUGGET OF TRUTH
GNOT

Throughout this eBook, I've sprinkled little Golden Nuggets of Truth. I've tried to distill some takeaway thoughts and place them in these little boxes of joy.



SOME PLACE IN INDIA... I ALWAYS FORGET THE NAME

LUCID DREAMING

Back in college, I did a little experiment with Lucid Dreaming. It was a bit crazy, but I now use the same exercise for composing photos.

Do you know what Lucid Dreaming is? It is the act of becoming "self-aware" in a dream. At that point, you are consciously aware that you are in a dream, have total command of all your

There is an old rule among first year photography students: "Never put the horizon in the middle." In my school, feel free to ignore that rule. If the horizon works in the middle, it works.

intellect, and can act however you want, knowing there is zero consequence. People accidentally slip into Lucid Dreaming from time to time, but it is actually a discipline that you can practice and improve upon.

By the way, I started writing this before I saw the movie "Inception". That is some Hollywood stuff -- I'm not talking about that. Even though I really dug that movie -- it is neither here nor there. Lucid Dreaming is in fact a real thing.

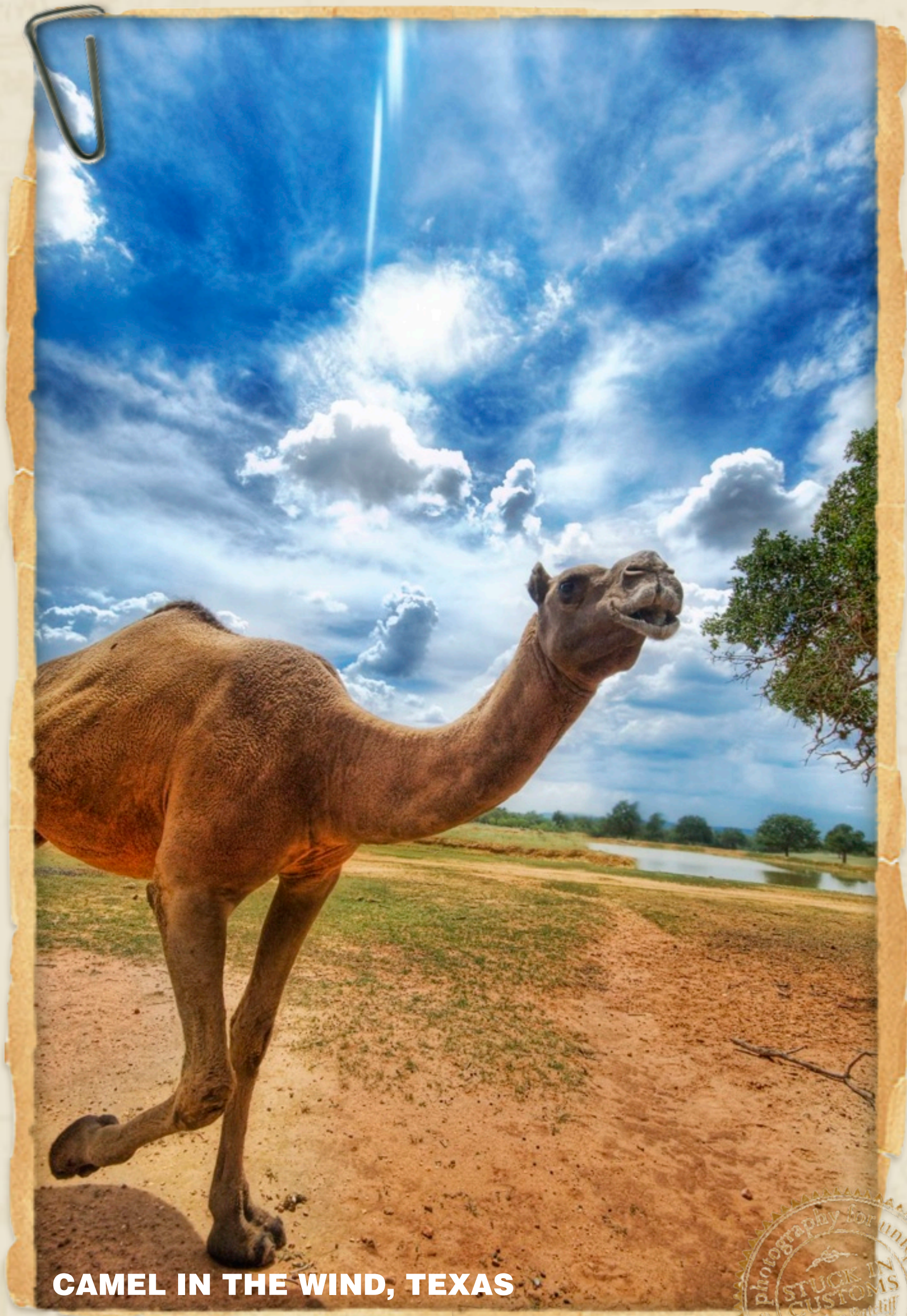
The exercise involves a real-life waking-time process. If you practice it enough in real life, it can be replicated in dream-state.

Did you know that when you dream, it is nearly impossible to "read" consistently? More impossible is the steady-state of signs and words. For example, in a dream you may see a sign that you interpret as "Frontier Road." If you look away, then look back, the sign may now say, "Oak Boulevard." This is a strange thing, and you think nothing of it in a dream because, of course, you are dreaming.

In real life, I began looking at signs, reading them, looking away, then looking back at the sign. I expected it to always be the same. Of course, in real life, it was. I did this thousands of times until it was automatic. Then, in a dream, this became a "trigger moment." When I noticed the sign was different, something would shake my brain into a waking-dream state. I could then become self-aware in the dream and take control. It is a wild thing.

Now, that is unproductive and just a fun mental exercise, but we can use the same technique when learning to better compose photos.

If an object is ever in motion, try to leave more room in the same direction in which the object is moving. Give that camel room to roam.

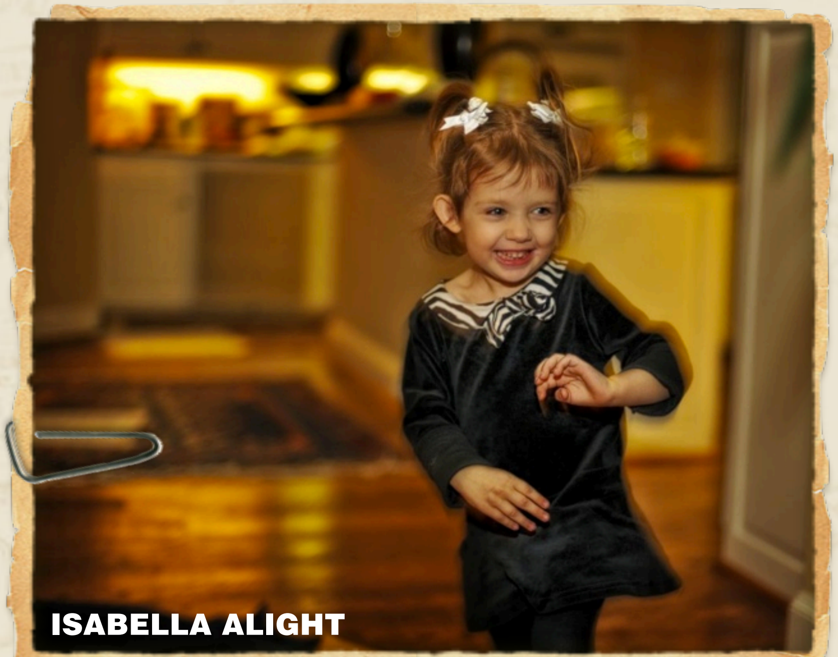


CAMEL IN THE WIND, TEXAS

THE EYE AND BRAIN AS A CAMERA AND MEMORY CARD

Begin to make the mental connection -- a tethering if you will -- between your eye and the camera. A second tether is independently associated: your brain and the memory card.

As you go through the day, stop and take a moment of Zen peace. It's only a moment -- maybe all you need is just 10 seconds. The trigger should be an interesting object or scene. More likely, you will be finding an interesting object, since you are not normally on a mountain vista or looking at some monument. It may be a coffee cup, a faucet in a new bathroom, or the geometric folds of the ceiling above your bed.



ISABELLA ALIGHT

It's hard on our old, wretched adult knees, but we are rewarded when we get down to the kids' eye level.

See that object, affix it to a spot in your eye, and then wrap a mental frame around it.

Look at it not only by itself, but in relation to the objects around it.

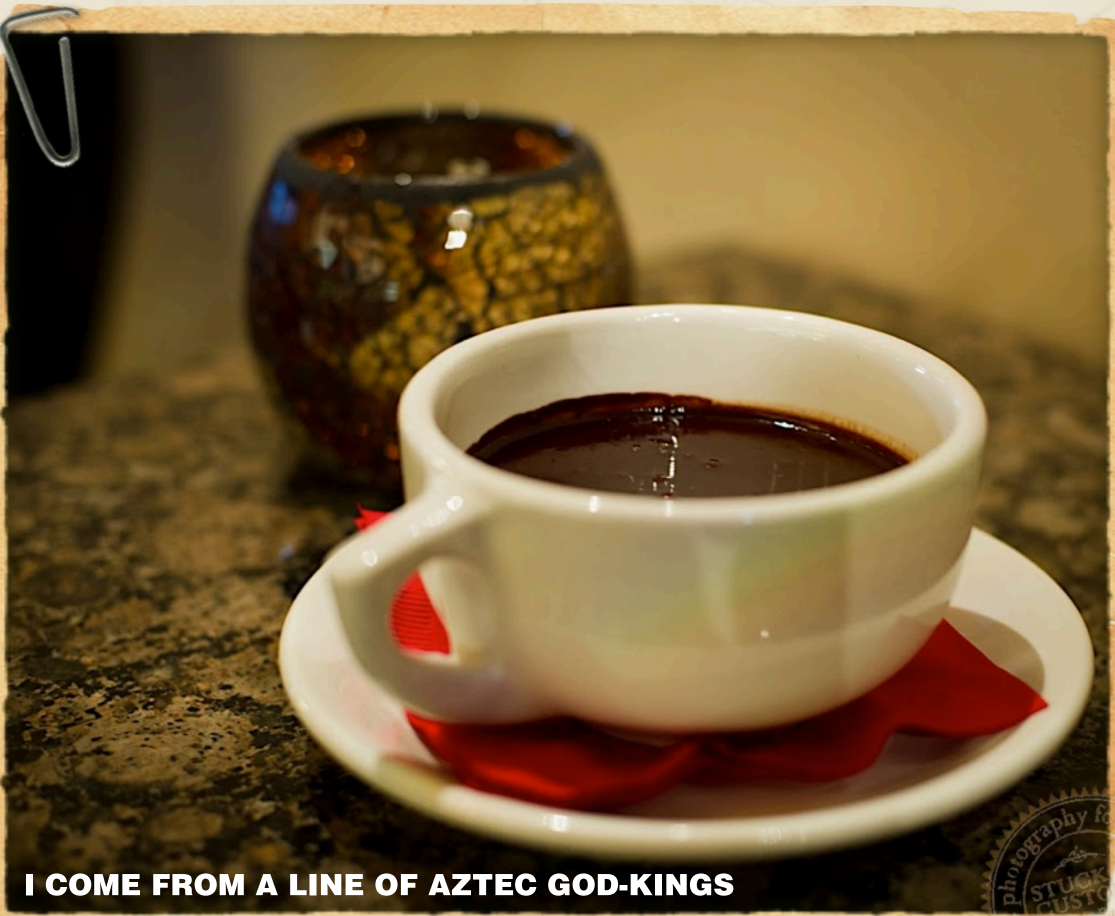
EXERCISE 1: SEEING WHAT IS THERE

Let's say it is indeed a coffee cup on a saucer. Where is it in relation to the edge of the table? Is it hanging off, or is the saucer so positioned so that it "might" be hanging off? What else is on the table? Does it distract from the coffee cup or complement it? Where are the windows or the light source?

GNOT

GOLDEN NUGGET OF TRUTH

This is a good tip for taking photos of kids or birthday parties. Move your perspective down to the eye level of the kids. 99% of the kids photos are looking DOWN at the kids. They are 99% less interesting than the ones that are at eye level. You will notice this trick is not just effective with kids, but also with "found objects," like coffee cups, candlesticks, flowers, food, and the like.



I COME FROM A LINE OF AZTEC GOD-KINGS

*Can we all agree this is not a cup of coffee? I love coffee, but I don't have it **that** strong. This is actually a photo of Aztec drinking chocolate from my other, secret blog somewhere on the Internets.*

Using coffee cups and household items are wonderful sources for practicing composition. In this one, for fun, I arranged the cup on the table with a smaller shaped candle. I like how the ovals, browns, and warm colors worked together. I kept the focus off-center, on the thick, menacing chocolate.

EXERCISE 2: CHANGING WHAT IS THERE

Now that you see the scene as it is, change it. Move your head around to a different angle. Consider how the cup may look larger or smaller in relation to other nearby objects. Try moving your head down to coffee-cup level. When you look at the coffee cup, think about how you can see it and how you are loosely aware of everything around it, even though you cannot see it in detail. Imagine, just briefly, if you were to take a photo that everything else would be "Bokeh" (blurry and out-of-focus).

EXERCISE 3: REARRANGE THE OBJECTS

Take nearby objects and move them around. Is your giant laptop making the coffee cup look tiny, insignificant, and too analog? Move your laptop away and take some more mental pictures. Rearrange objects on the table until they make an interesting still life. Think about the great painters and how they would spend hours and even days arranging a still life in a certain formation. Some shapes look good by one another. Some do not. Why is this, and how can you tell? Over time, you will get more and more of a "feeling" for what works just by moving stuff around. Inside, just say "better" or "worse." Move things around and then repeat.

THE WINTER CHURCH AND TOWN, REYKJAVIK

EXERCISE 4: TAKE MORE MENTAL PICTURES

Try to stop recording the whole session as a "mental video." You have this nonstop stream of life flowing into your eyes. Begin doing little blinks here and there. Imagine you have just snapped a photo. There is no need to do the "movie director" finger-framing move. That is kind of silly. Do it in your brain. It's much more powerful. You may wish to just use your dominant eye to take the photo.

EXERCISE 5: RATE YOUR MENTAL PHOTOS!

This is very important! Have a rating system. I suggest 1 to 5 stars. What you NEED to improve at is telling the difference between a good picture and bad picture. Every time you take a snap, think about it. Say, "Okay, that was just a random snap. It's okay, and I'll give it 2 stars." Most of your snaps will be like this. On occasion, you will say, "Oh, THAT is interesting. Snap. 5 Stars!" The more you do this, the more you will recognize it.

Now, let me talk to the men out there for a moment. I know this cuts out 50% of the audience, but that is okay. This is a special tip for men. I don't really know how women think about these sorts of things, but I am pretty sure it is different. Now, okay men, think about women in a room for a minute. Yes, you know what I mean. You are in a room with, let's say, 10 different women. Given enough time, you will automatically rank them in terms of "pretty factor." I think men cannot help but do this. Take this same mental process (which is natural), and begin to use the same system for your mental composition-photos. Men are already hard-wired to "rank" things around them, so bring this discipline to your mental photography as well.

Women, I know you read the previous paragraph anyway, since you cannot be controlled or told what to do. Yes, men are awful, but think about this "ranking system." You have it too, but it is just a bit different. Bring your similar set of skills to ranking photos. You must do it. Otherwise, every photo will just swim around in a "sea of possibilities," and you won't begin to separate the wheat from the chaff.

AUSTRALIA
BELLS BEACH · VICTORIA

Now, none of this is exclusive to the sexes (there is a lot of overlap) but women do indeed tend to "gather" more with their eyes than men. Women are particularly skilled at looking at one object in context of others, and this can help them to compose very interesting photos. However, there is a tendency to just continue "gathering" and not to stop, take a photo, remember it, and then compare it to other compositions. None of this stuff is easy, but by playing off in-born abilities, all of us can improve on self-selecting the most intriguing compositions.

EXERCISE 6: REMEMBER YOUR DAY'S BEST

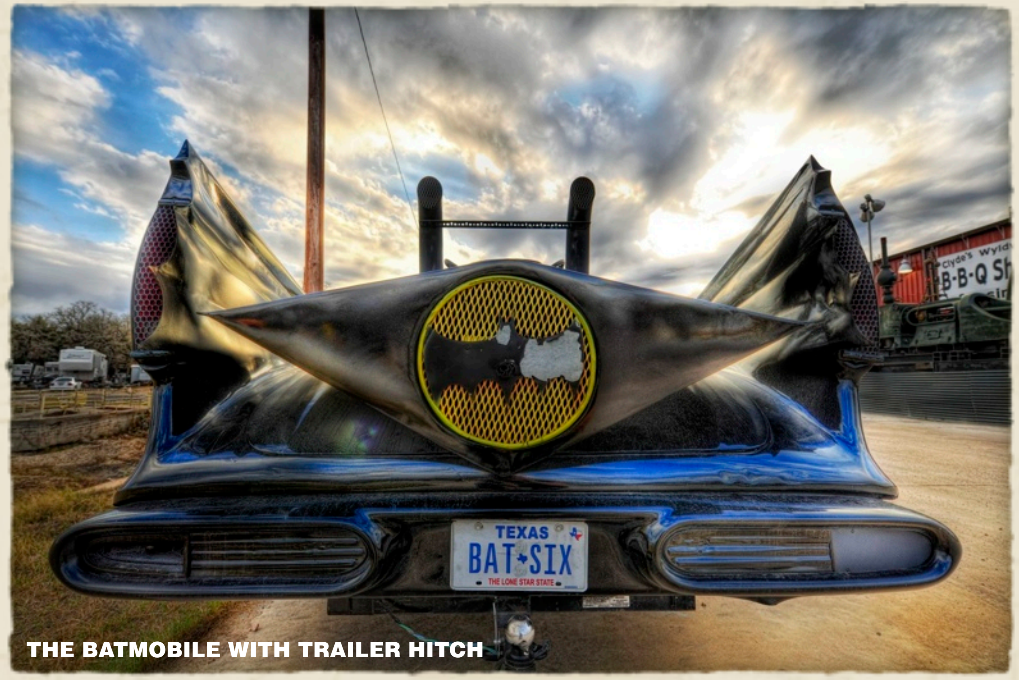
At the end of the day, think about your 5-star photos. Try to get it into a routine. How about brushing your teeth at night? That is one of the few times you are only doing one thing (not 25% on Facebook while doing something else!) Or maybe that moment when your head hits the pillow at night. Whatever the "Routine Spot," think about your best photos of the day. Remember, these are all mental photos, because many days you may not be carrying a camera at all.

ESTABLISHING A MENTAL PATTERN OF COMPOSITION

Simply by repeating this process day after day, week after week, you WILL get better at composition -- all without lifting a camera.

There is a famous experiment where basketball players were separated into two groups. The experiment was to test the effectiveness of a mental exercise on the shooting of free throws. One group was to practice shooting free throws in the traditional manner, while the other group was to practice for the same amount of time, but only with their mind. Both groups showed equal improvement in their conditioning.

OUR GINGERBREAD HOUSE



THE BATMOBILE WITH TRAILER HITCH

Many experiments have been done in this space. If you want more details, visit: http://www.bepress.com/jirspa/vol5/iss1/art2/

Of course, this simply goes to prove the case for mental practice of photography and composition.

IMMIGRATION
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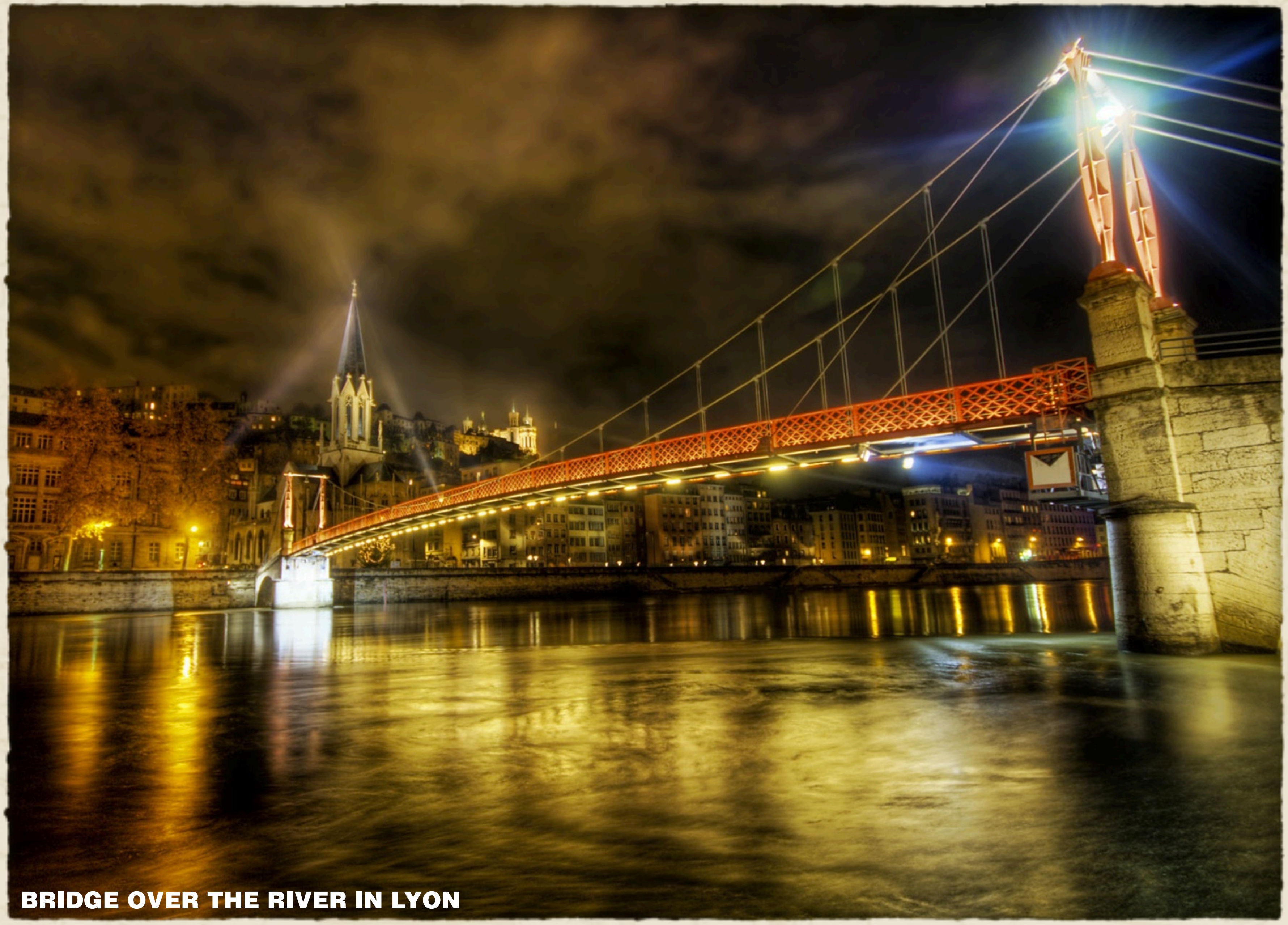
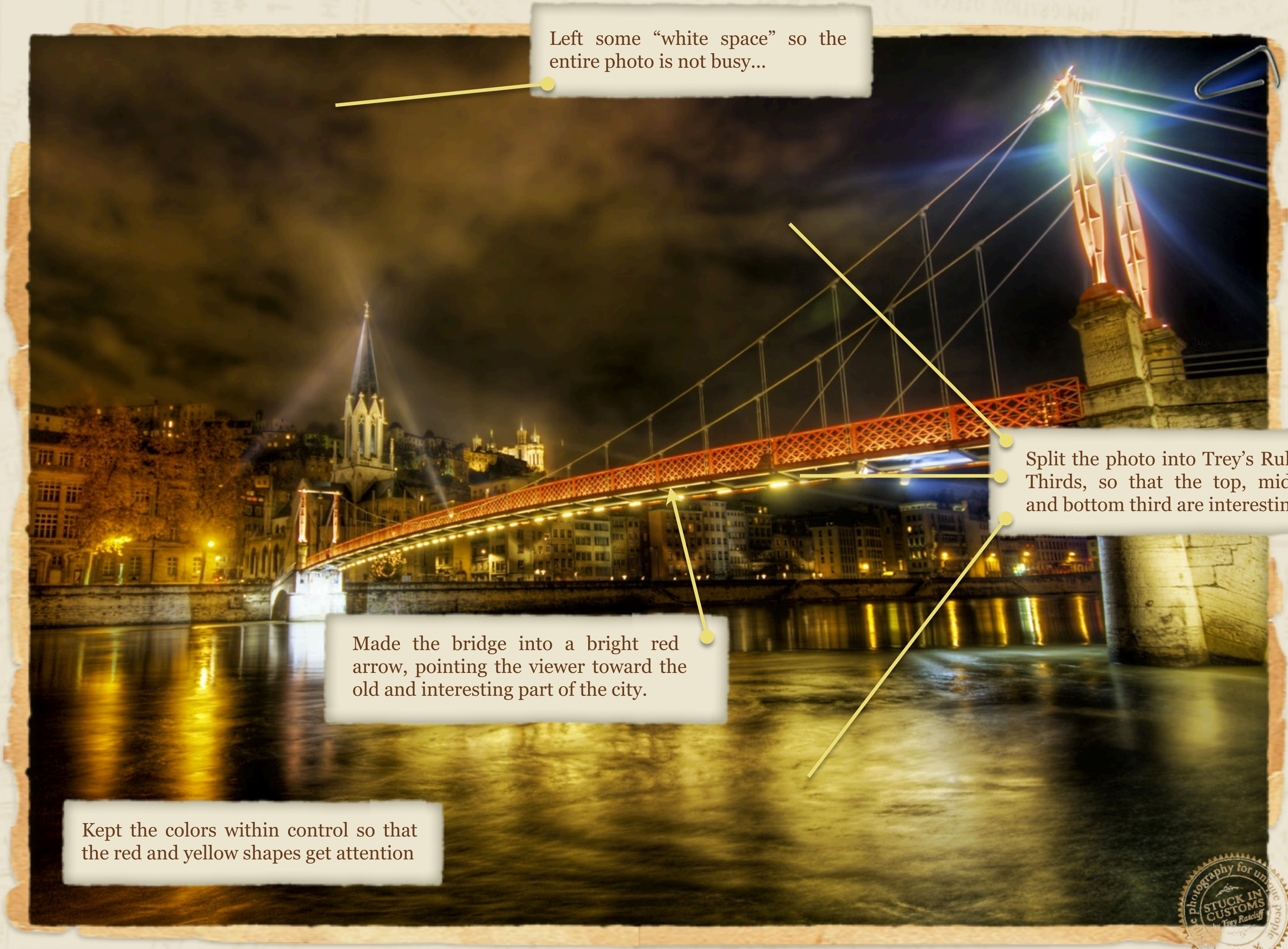
AUSTRALIA

You can achieve an interesting effect by using a wide-angle lens and getting in tight on the most interesting bit of a car, but you have to get in super-close. There will be some distortion on the edges, but on many cars, that distortion can make it look even cooler.

COMPOSING THE COVER SHOT



BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER IN LYON

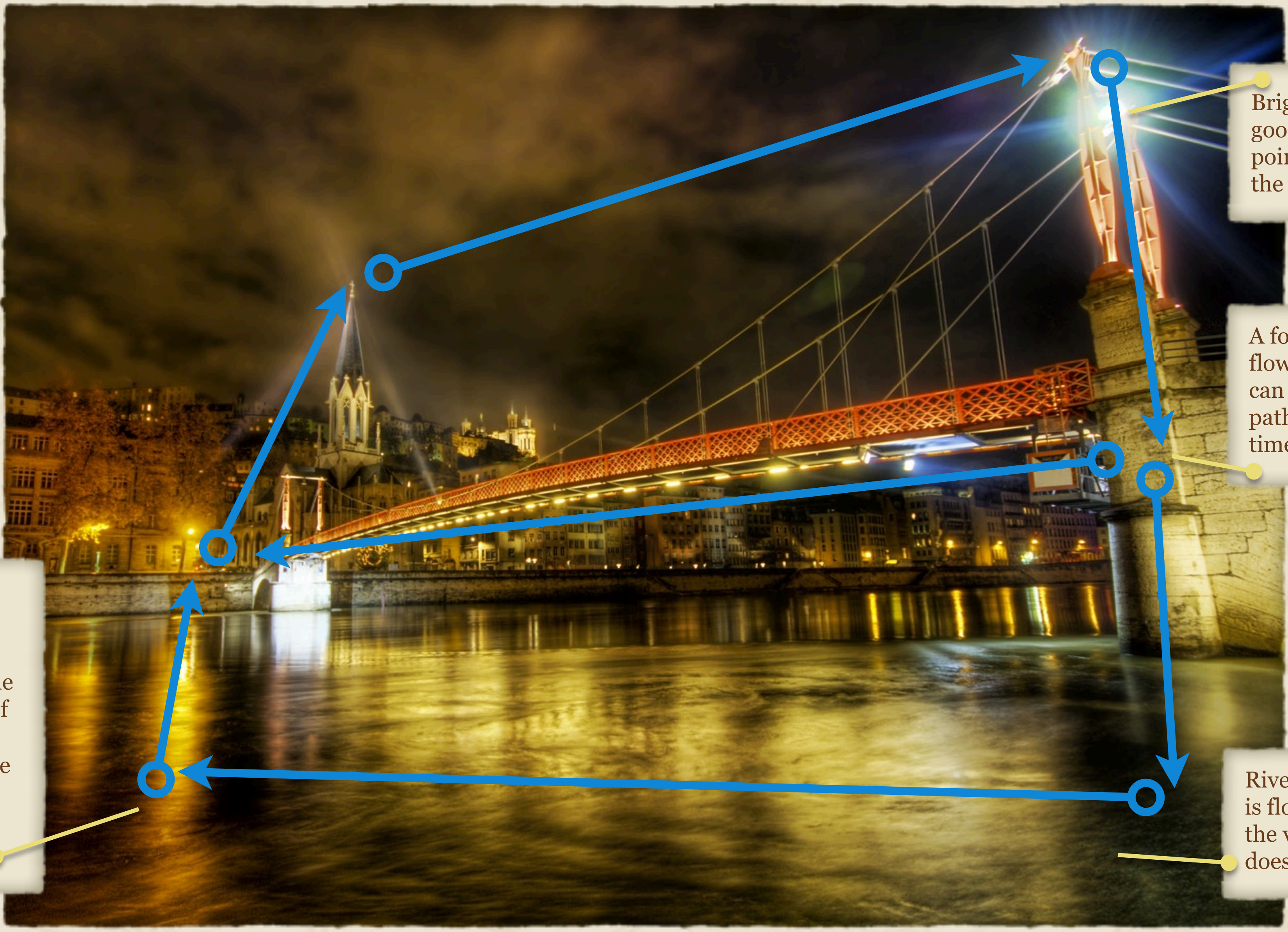


Left some “white space” so the entire photo is not busy…

Split the photo into Trey’s Rule of Thirds, so that the top, middle, and bottom third are interesting.

Made the bridge into a bright red arrow, pointing the viewer toward the old and interesting part of the city.

Kept the colors within control so that the red and yellow shapes get attention



Bright spot is a good starting point that draws the eye

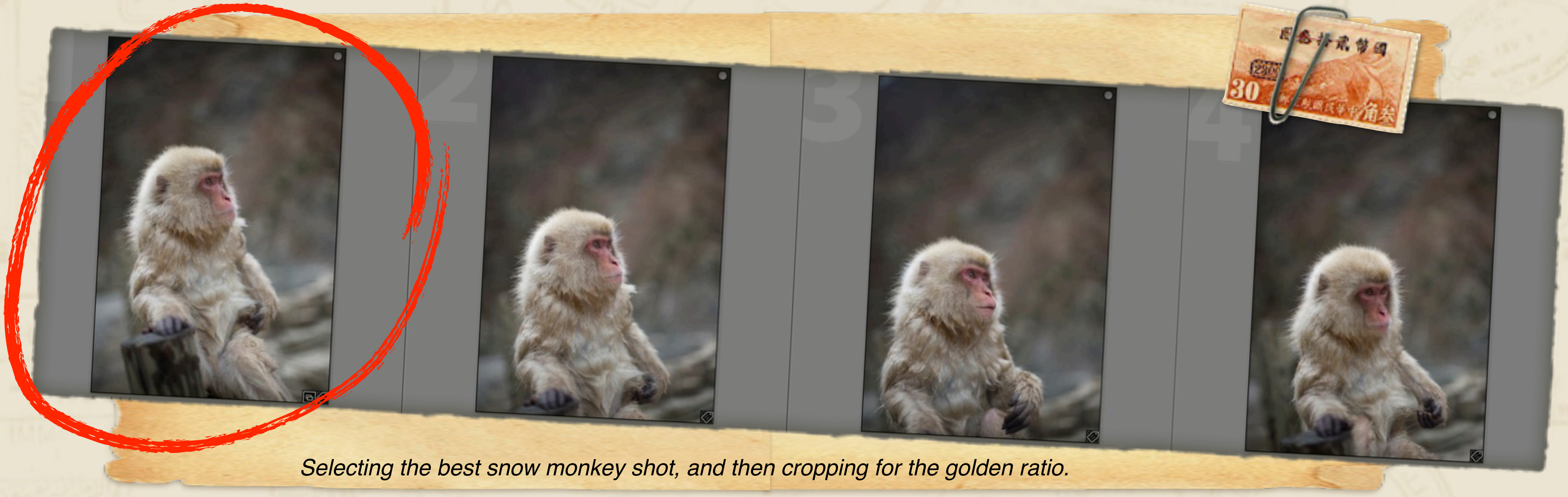
A fork in the flow. The viewer can choose a new path the 2nd time around

River feels like it is flowing left, so the viewer's eye does as well.

Bright yellow vertical line in the middle of black draws the viewer's eye up again.

EYE FLOW AROUND THE PHOTO

Above, I put some notes about how I have tried to help the viewer's eye casually traverse the landscape of the photo. Follow the blue lines to see a typical eye flow.

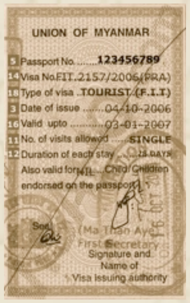


Selecting the best snow monkey shot, and then cropping for the golden ratio.

THE GOLDEN RATIO

Ahhhhh Phi. Either you will agree with me here or not. But I strongly believe in this mathematical ratio, and maybe I can convince you of its inherent beauty.

What is the Golden Ratio? I'll give you the geeky answer and then the practical art answer.



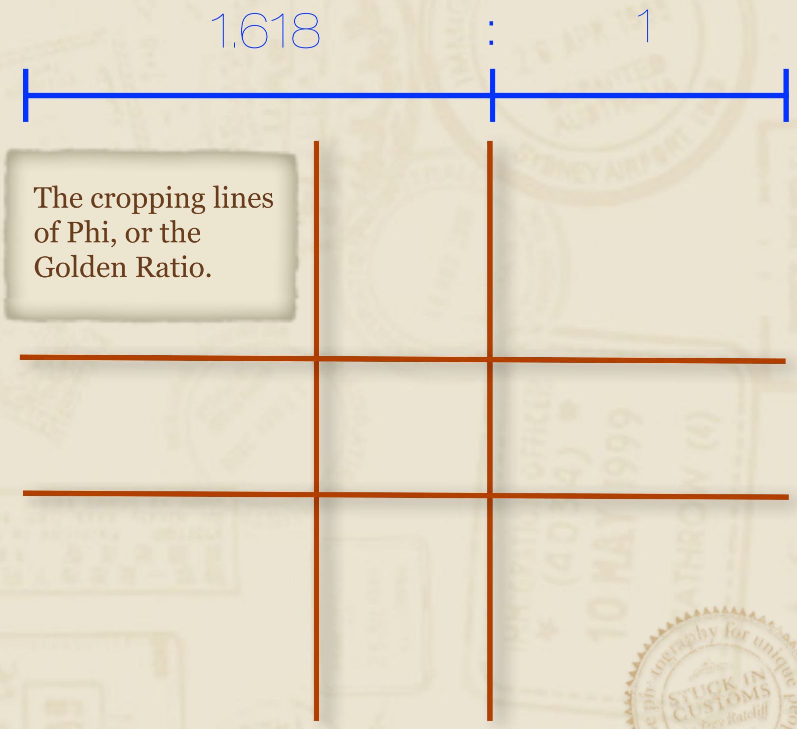
UNION OF MYANMAR

5 Passport No. 123456789
14 Visa No.FIT..2157/2006(PRA)
18 Type of visa ..TOURIST (F.I.T.)
3 Date of issue 04-10-2006
16 Valid upto 03-01-2007
11 No. of visits allowed ......SINGLE
12 Duration of each stay ....28 DAYS
Also valid for NIL ....Child/Children endorsed on the passport

Seal

(Ma Than Aye)
First Secretary
Signature and
Name of
Visa issuing authority

Geeky Answer: The Golden Ratio is the ratio of 1 to 1.618 (and it goes on and on). It's also known as "Phi" and is one of those wonderful inscrutable numbers like Pi, which everyone knows. It is arrived at via a Fibonacci sequence, which you may remember proceeds to the tune of 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, etc. If you take the latter number and divide it by the former, it slowly becomes Phi, or, for rounding purposes 1.618.



The cropping lines of Phi, or the Golden Ratio.

Why is the geeky side interesting to me? Well, I am one! My degree is in computer science and math, so I appreciate the wonderful nature of numbers. On the other side of the coin, I love how they interact with nature itself.

Practical Art Answer: Whenever that ratio is applied to paintings, sculpture, architecture, design, or photography, a natural beauty emerges. If you look at classic works of art, from famous buildings to famous paintings, you will find the golden ratio hidden.

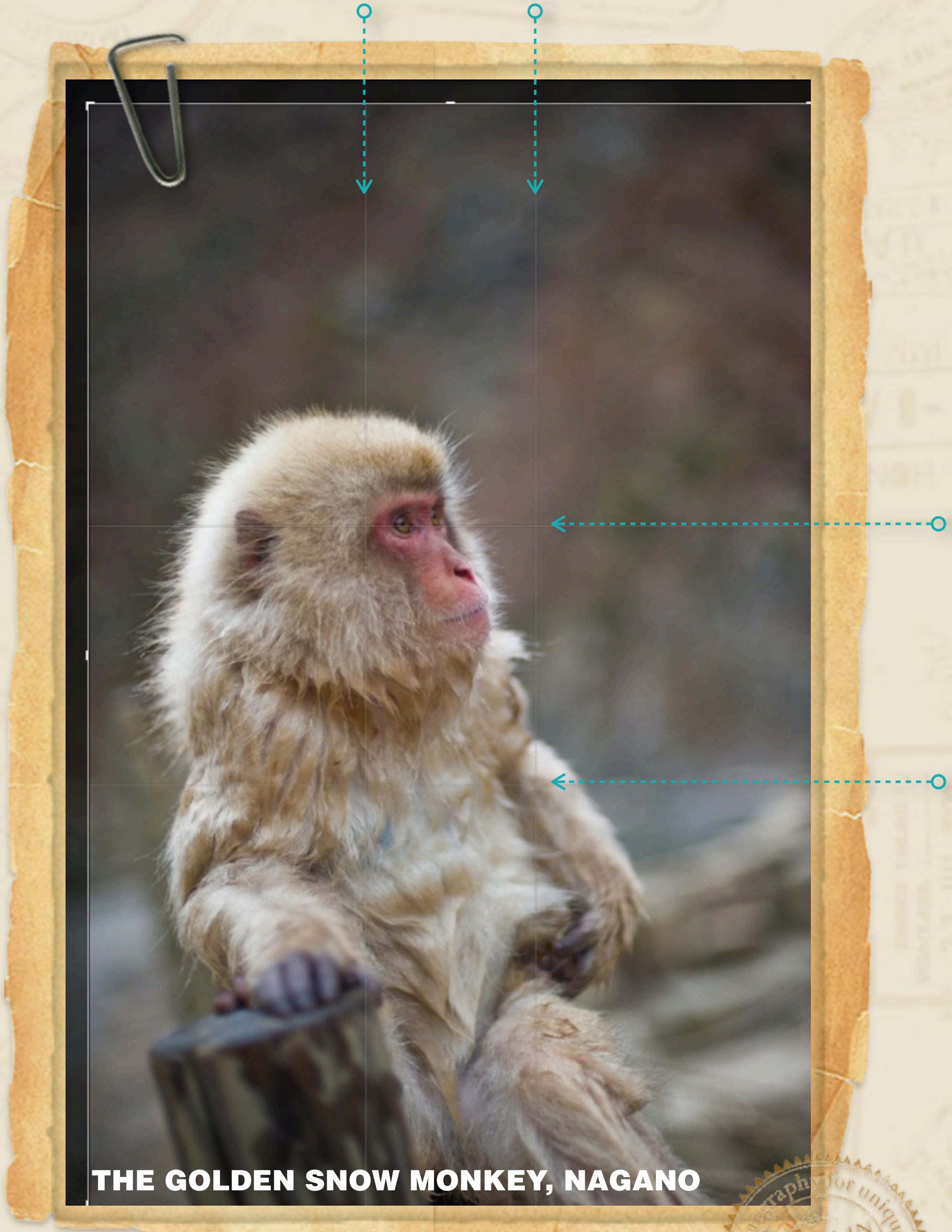
To see more, I invite you to see this video on YouTube about the Golden Ratio:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2bAlIK4KkE&feature=related

Secret Golden Ratio Tip

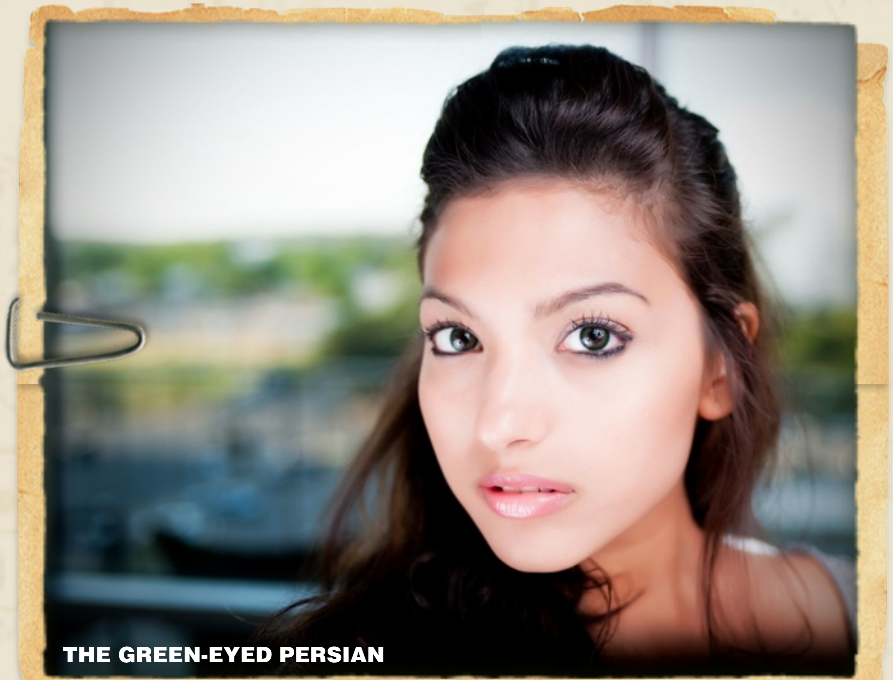
Did you know that the latest Adobe Lightroom has a "Golden Ratio" overlay? By default, it uses the "Rule of Thirds", but you can cycle through these presets (by pressing **O** while cropping) to get the Golden Ratio overlay. It's much better. I use it.

Notice the snow monkey on the right; you can see the Golden Ratio lines are overlayed in Lightroom.



THE GOLDEN SNOW MONKEY, NAGANO

HOW TO USE THE GOLDEN RATIO IN PHOTO CROPPING



THE GREEN-EYED PERSIAN

Slightly off-center, with the line betwixt the eyes riding the phi train

When using the Golden Ratio, try to line up the main object of interest (or objects) along the lines that the Golden Ratio forms. This means that, for example, when taking a photo of a person, the center of their nose should go right down the line.

Do not position the object right in the middle, and don't do it too much off to the side.

When positioning an object to the right or left of center, people often have trouble figuring out, "Well how far over should I put it?" I notice most people put it too far over to the left or right. It feels like it is "crowding" the edge of the frame.

The beautiful point is not "a bit off center" or "too far to the side", but right in between there. This is hard to understand in text, yes? Here is another way to think of it. The object should be PURPOSEFULLY off-center; not just a little bit off center.

If you are unsure, capture MORE than you need in the frame, and you can crop later in when post processing.

LOST IN THE STREETS OF FRANCE AFTER MIDNIGHT

THE FISHING VILLAGE, NW ICELAND

if you are having trouble with figuring out where to put the horizon, align it along one of the horizontal lines of phi

CAR 123, TOKYO

Sometimes a little bit of tilt looks like a mistake. If you want to make the tilt look purposeful and artsy, be sure to go beyond 10 degrees.

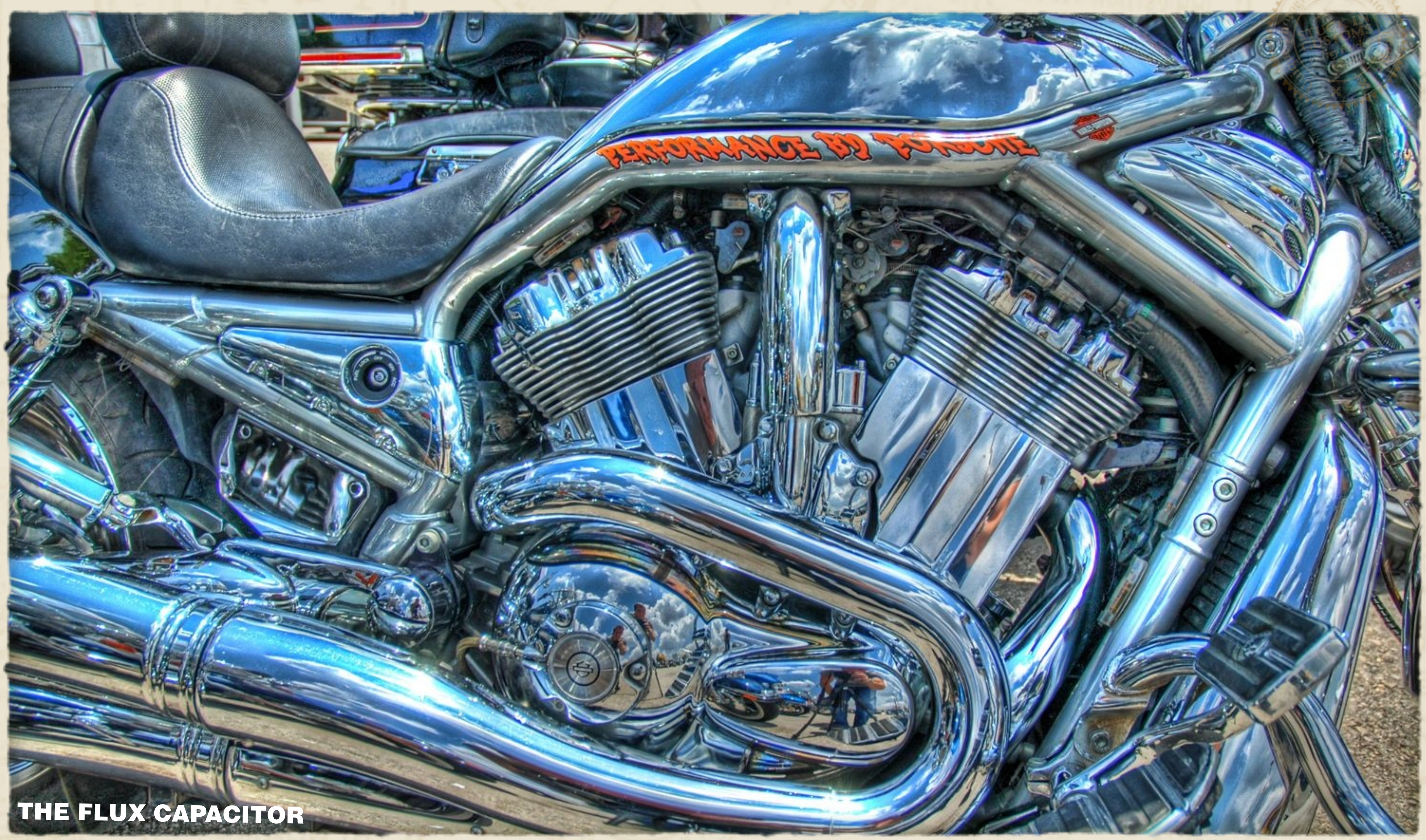
HOW TO USE THE GOLDEN RATIO IN PHOTO CROPPING (CONT'D)

A good analogy is the tilting of the horizon. Sometimes, to be fancy or fun, people will rotate a photo so that the horizon is not level. This is a great technique, but notice that the horizon tilt needs to be fairly extreme. If it is just "a little tilted", then it looks like the photographer has made a mistake! It is the same way when composing the object in the frame. If it is just a little bit off-center, it feels like the photographer made a mistake.

Having trouble figuring out where to put the horizon? Drop it off on one of the horizontal Golden Ratio lines. It won't be right in the center or 1/3 up or down... but somewhere in between there.

Now, many times, you don't just have one object that you are trying to line up. You may have many objects of interest. In this case, you should try to get as many as possible to line up on the lines of the Golden Ratio. However, you may notice that sometimes you just cannot get things on the Golden Ratio lines. Remember these situations! The problem is that it is now too late! After you have taken the photo, there is only so much you can do. Next time, think more about the Golden Ratio when you are capturing the shot, to position things in the frame in the right spot.

Sometimes, after you get it into Lightroom to do the cropping adjustment, it's just too late.



THE FLUX CAPACITOR

AGGRESSIVE CROPPING

Get in tight on the most interesting element of what you are shooting. In the above example, the default “reflex” is to take a photo of the entire motorcycle. While this can be fine, if you get in tight on the most interesting bit, then the viewer will have the pleasure of “filling in the rest” with their mind. Now, this often works out better, because their mind will do a better and more fanciful job at filling in the missing bits.

THE RULE OF THIRDS

Don't use it! What a thing to say! I know...

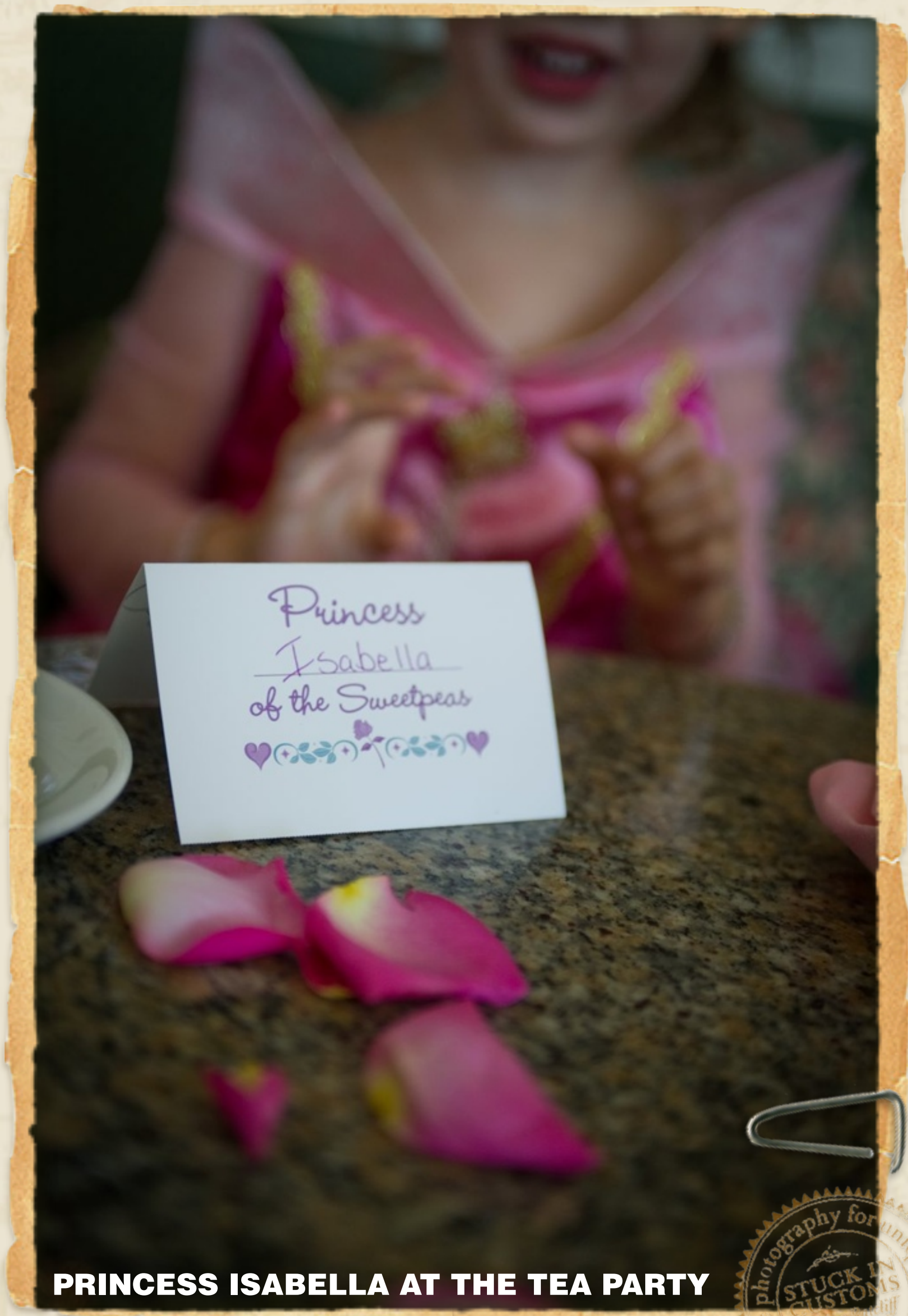
Look, this is all my opinion. This may be the opposite of everything you have ever heard. I don't take "conventional wisdom" as law. I question everything, and you should too. The "Rule of Thirds" was not cast in stone and brought down by Moses. It is one of these things that floats around, and its origin is under debate.

What is the Rule of Thirds (in case you don't know)? It basically is the carving up of the frame into thirds. Imagine drawing a tic-tac-toe board inside the rectangle, so that every rectangle inside is the same size. In the Rule of Thirds, you are instructed to line up objects along these lines.

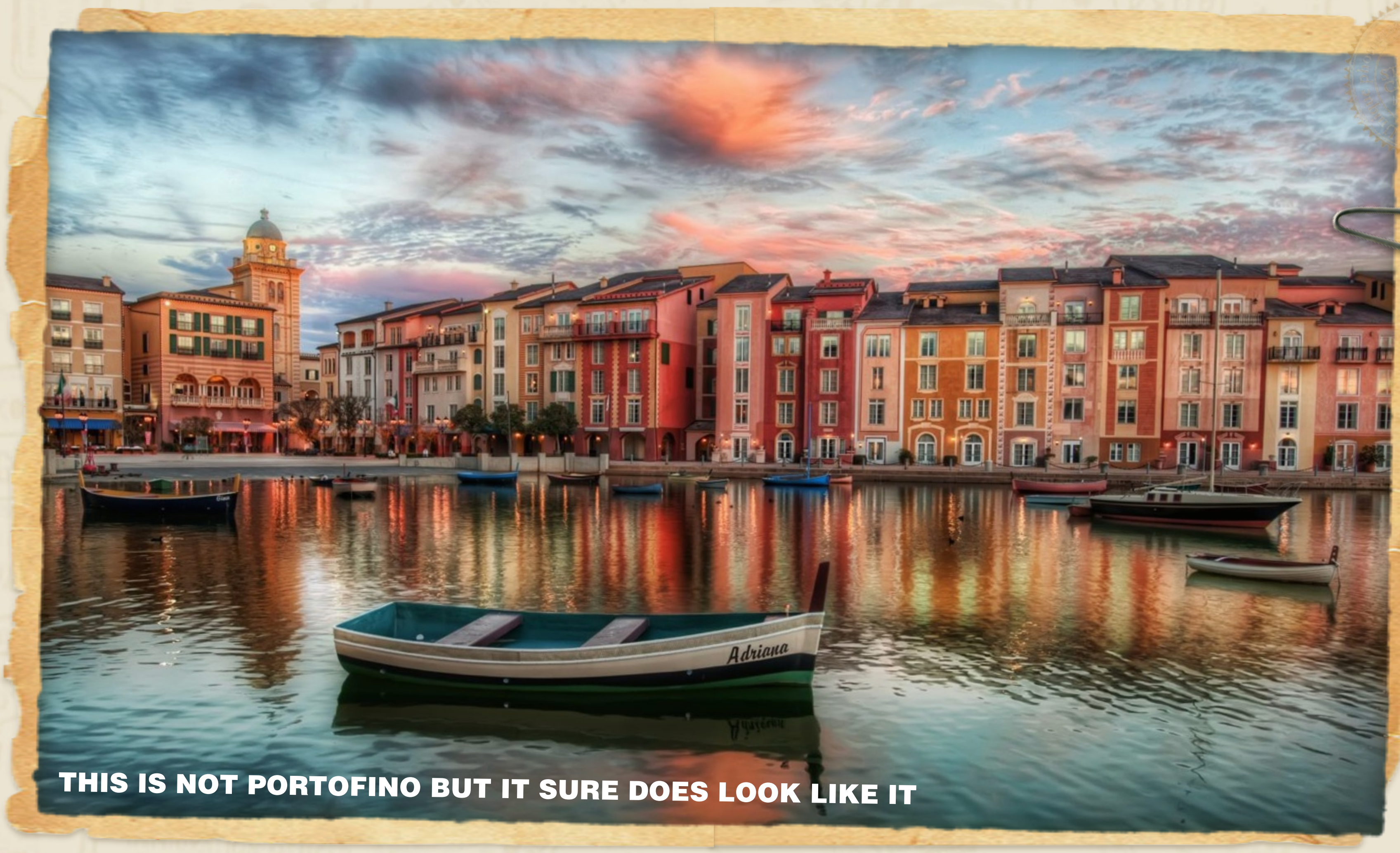
In my analysis, the "Rule of Thirds" is something that is told to new photographers that are just getting started. It is helpful insofar as it gets people to take photos "off center." But, it falls short. In many ways, I think of it as a "poor man's Golden Ratio." If you look at some of the most beautiful photos, paintings, and the like, you will see they adhere more often to the Golden Ratio than the Rule of Thirds.

Anyway, I certainly use the Golden Ratio more than the Rule of Thirds. And, insofar as this eBook is my advice on composition, I certainly advise to forget everything you know about the Rule of Thirds.

See this shot on the right? My wife actually took it. After years and years of training, I've gotten her to learn "Trey's Rule of Thirds," which you will learn about on the next page. I hope it takes you less than several years to make use of it.



PRINCESS ISABELLA AT THE TEA PARTY



THIS IS NOT PORTOFINO BUT IT SURE DOES LOOK LIKE IT

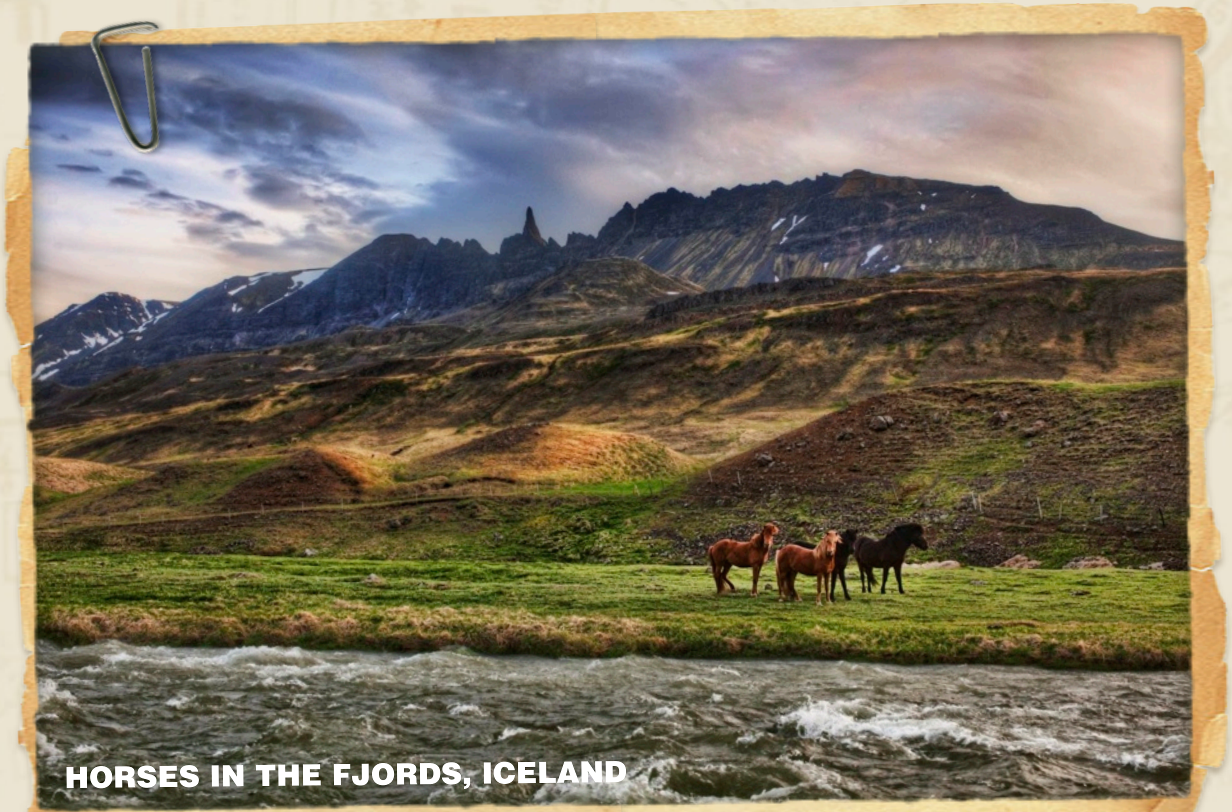
TREY'S RULE OF THIRDS

Having said that, I do have "Trey's Rule of Thirds," which is confusingly named on purpose. I am indeed trying to co-opt that name for my own purpose, but if it helps you remember this case, then that is great!

GNOT

GOLDEN NUGGET OF TRUTH

Trey's Rule of Thirds:
The top third of your photo should be interesting. The middle third of your photo should be interesting. The bottom third of your photo should be interesting. *And so it is written.*



In this photo, I made sure to keep the bottom, middle, and top third interesting.

TREY'S RULE OF THIRDS

I recommend keeping each third of your photo interesting. This is not easy to do, but it is necessary for a fully satisfying image. Many times, I see amazing photos -- or, shall I say, 1/3 or 2/3 of them are interesting. As soon as 1/3 of them fall apart, the whole image falls apart.

Perhaps you have seen a photo like the one I am about to describe on the Internet. There may be a beautiful sunset in the top third. And I mean gorgeous... Clouds out of a painting and colors that are beyond belief. The middle third may be a stunning house with incredible textures, rich woodwork, and intriguing lines. The bottom third may be horrible! It's a boring concrete driveway with an SUV parked sideways.

In the example above, all the beauty is sucked away by the bottom third.

When shooting a photo of a building, architecture, house, or something where there may be cars nearby, do not get any identifiable cars in the photo. The only exception is if the car is an older car, a charming car, an awesome car, or something along these lines. No one wants a Ford Taurus in their photo. The photo should be as timeless as possible, and the Ford Taurus will make part of your photo mundane and boring.

If 1/3 of the photo is boring, the viewer's eye will stop meandering around the photo. As soon as you give the viewer's eye something boring, it will move away. If it keeps moving away from the boring third, you have thrown off the whole composition.

A photo is only as strong as its weakest part.

If a significant object or amount of your photo is mundane and boring, the whole thing will be mundane and boring.

IMMIGRATION
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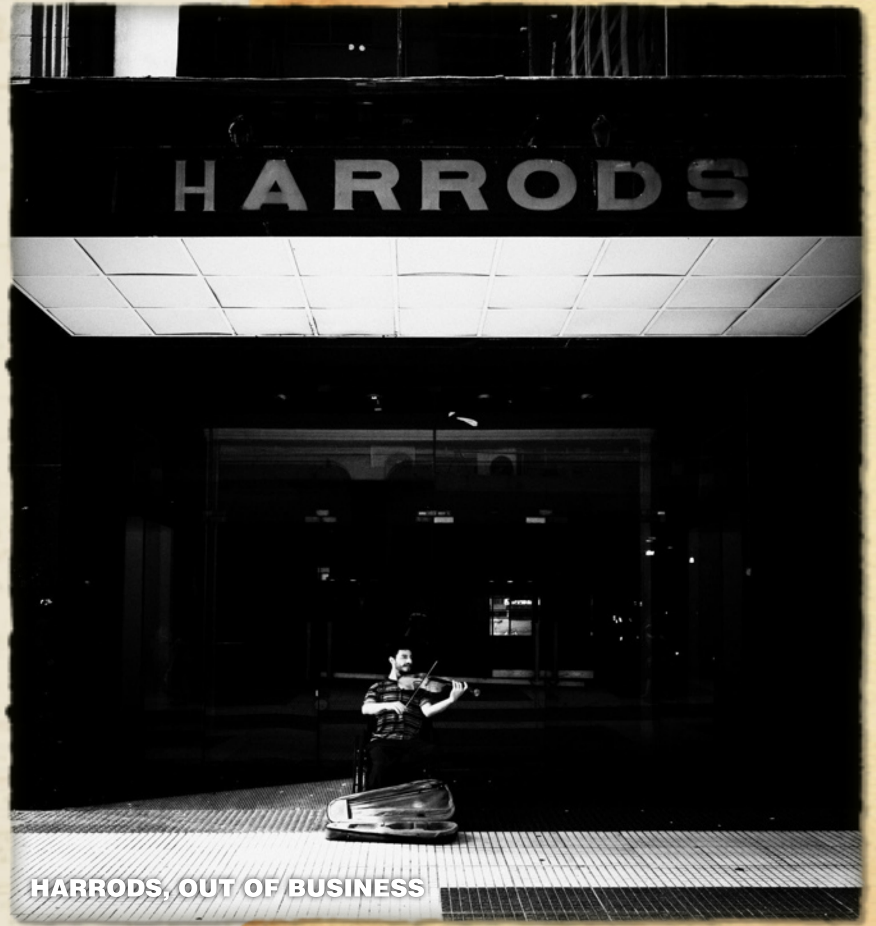
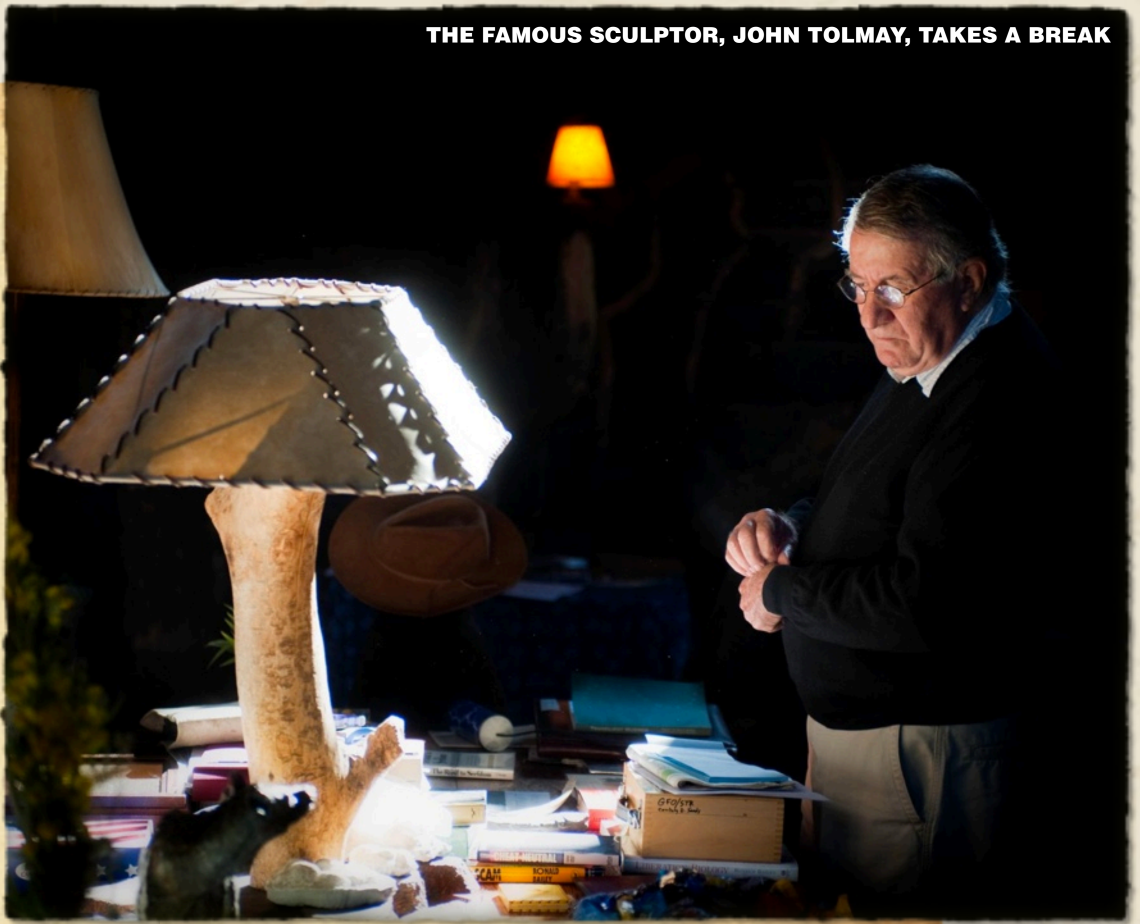
12 APR 2007
PERTH AIRPORT
2421
AUSTRALIA



HARRODS, OUT OF BUSINESS



THE FAMOUS SCULPTOR, JOHN TOLMAY, TAKES A BREAK

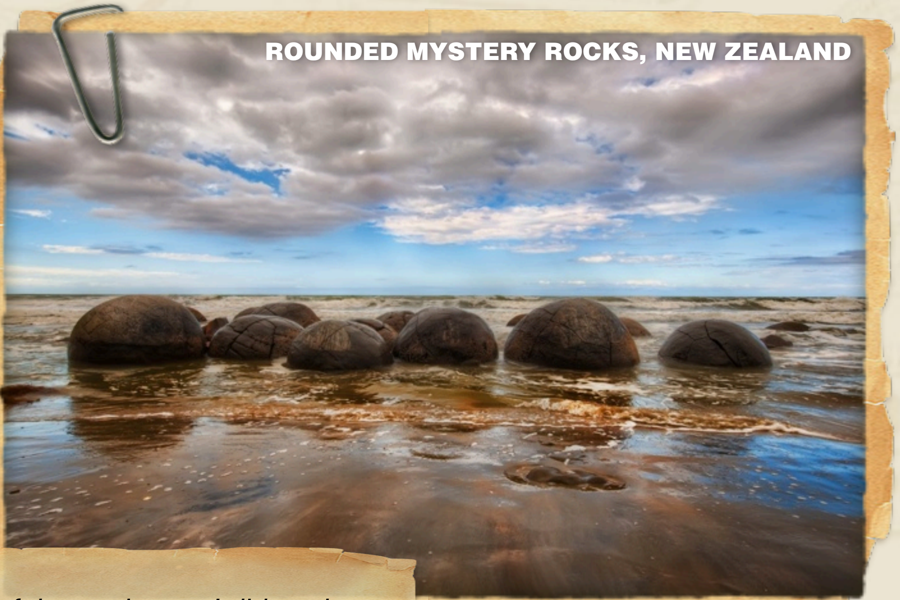
Sometimes, you can find thirds when you are not looking. In the example to the left, the middle third is blank, which then makes the other two thirds get more attention. In that sense, the absence of anything is, indeed, interesting. In the photo above, the thirds are split vertically. Again, the middle third shows a negative space that is interesting in its absence.

2D AND 3D

So, a bit of personal history here that will be helpful in this discussion.

I grew up blind in one eye. I still don't see out of it. I only use my left eye. When I look at the world, I do not see in 3D the way people with two good eyes do. I can't triangulate the distance of one object relative to another using two retinas, so I've come up with my own system to represent "depth."

Now, this is kind of a bummer, right? But, it actually comes in SUPER handy with photography. Since I am always translating a 2D view into a 3D world, I take special care to see the world in a certain way.



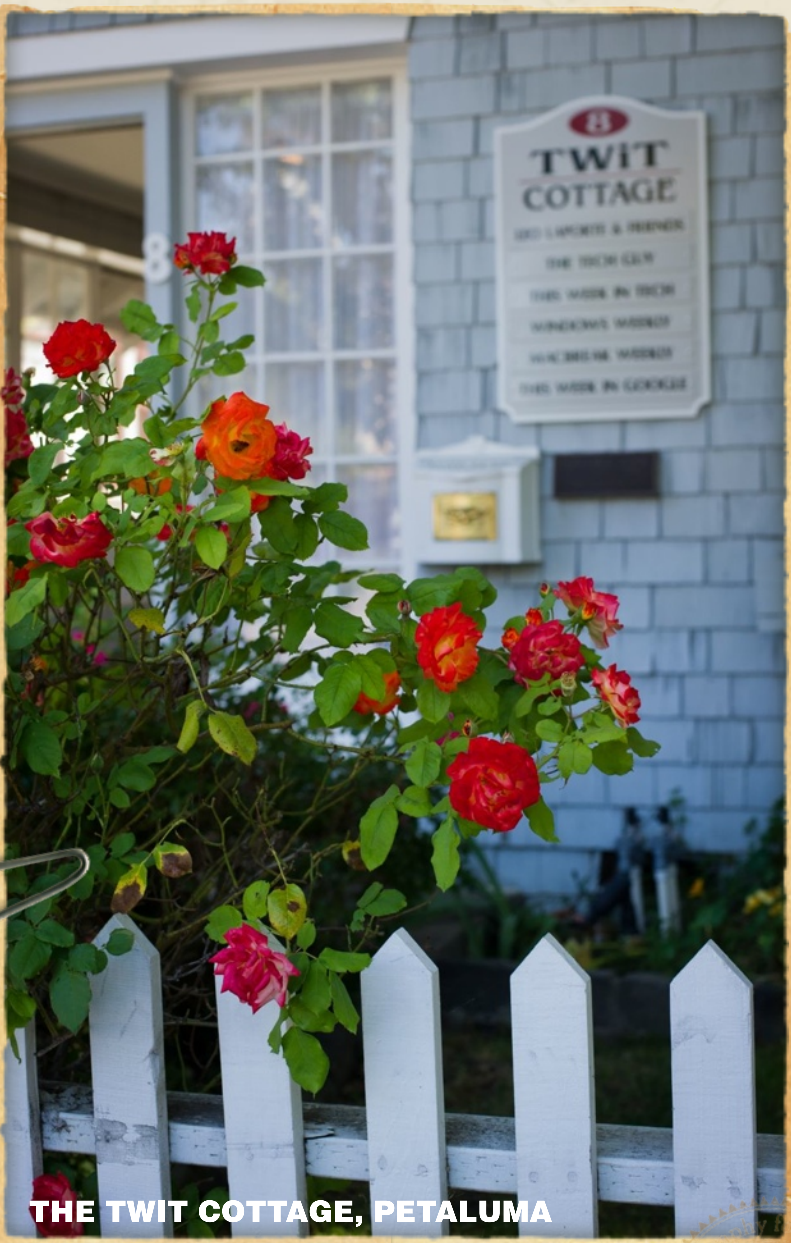
ROUNDED MYSTERY ROCKS, NEW ZEALAND

In both of these photos, I did my best to communicate a sense of depth to a flat photo. The eye can effortlessly sense what is close and what is far.

THE SPIRAL CHURCH, SAN FRANCISCO

Think about a photo. There is no depth at all. It's just a flat image. The user must take the objects inside the photo and "imagine" a 3D world. The easier you make this, the more "fun" the brain has when figuring out the 3D world.

There is an old tale about Picasso on a train. I may get the details wrong, and I am sorry about that. Picasso is sitting by some boorish man who is ranting about his dislike of Picasso's modern paintings. He said they don't look real. And then he produced a wallet-photo of his wife, indicating that this is a realistic picture of her. Picasso looked at the photo for a long time then said, "Well, she is awfully small. And flat."



THE TWIT COTTAGE, PETALUMA

By using layering and bokeh, the viewer is immediately able to detect the z-space. Make it as easy as possible for the viewer to envision the actual scene.

2D AND 3D (CONT'D)

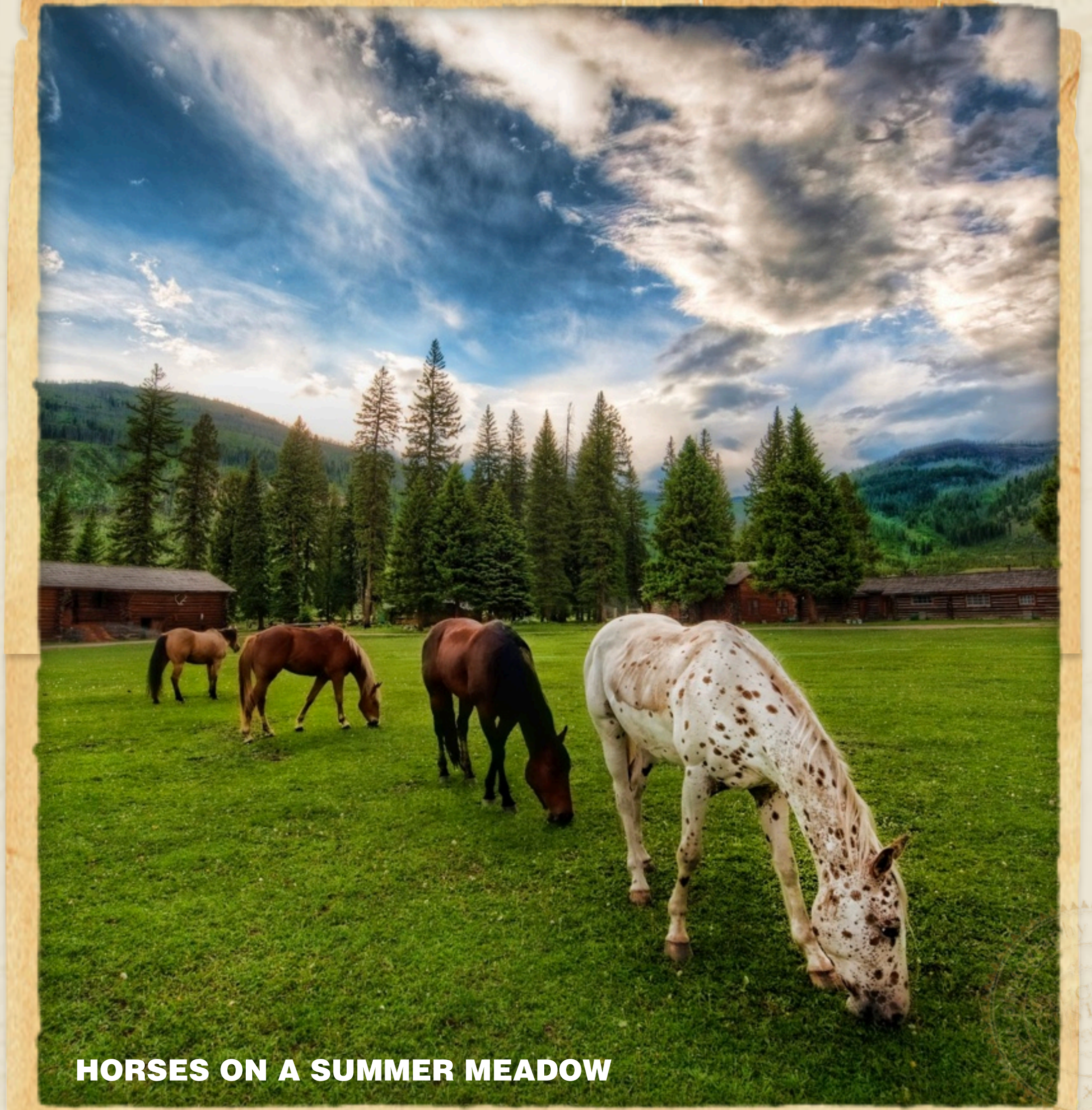
This delightful story helps us to quickly think about how much our brain does when we look at the photo. Obviously, our first instinct is not that we are looking at something flat! Our brain takes the objects in the photo and determines the "depth" of each one. If you see a tree way off in the distance and a child in front, your brain does not think, "Oh my! That is a giant child!"

When you look at a photo, you don't have two eyes figuring out the scene; you effectively have one! Since you can't use your main trick of two eyes to determine depth, you have to go by "object experience." That is, you consult your internal database of "child size" and your internal database of "tree size", consult the photo, and then determine that the child must be several hundred feet in front of the trees.

Your brain actually quite enjoys placing objects in "z space." (Z space is the depth bit of the X and Y Cartesian locations). If the photo does not have enough objects of consequence in it, the brain will have great trouble figuring out what is where in the Z space.

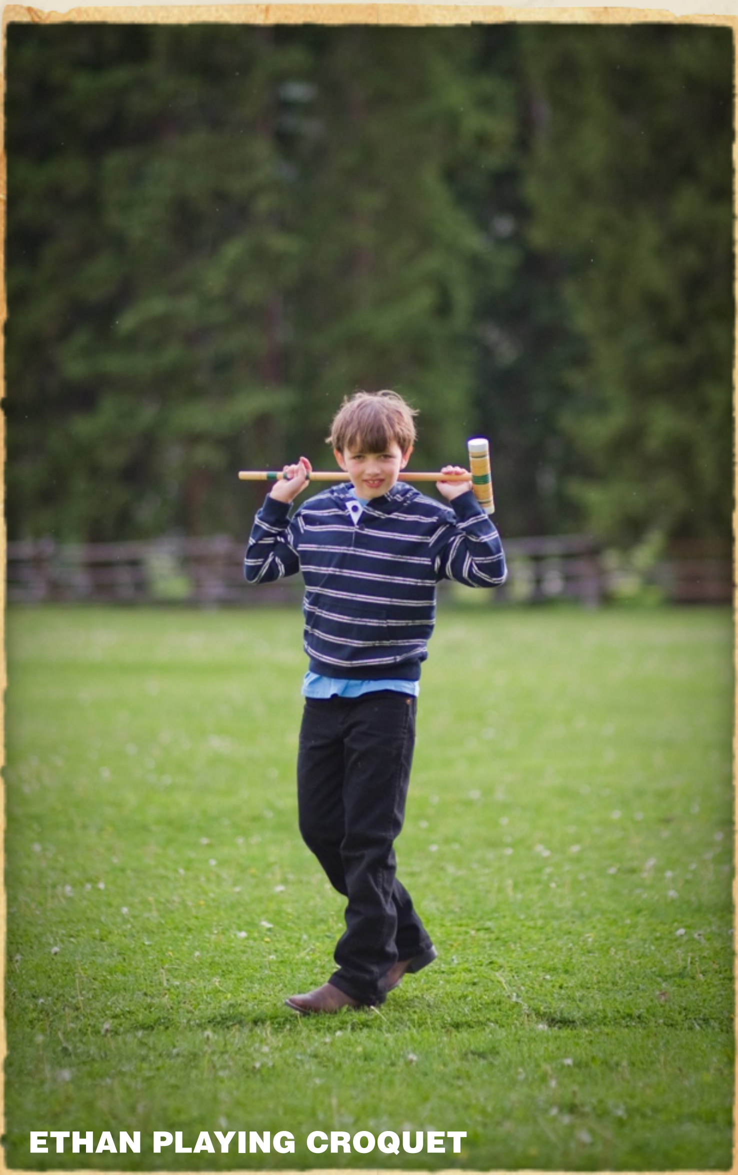
Why does the human brain like figuring things out in z-space? It comes from basic Pleistocene evolutionary principles. We need to assess the entire situation. First, we look for threats to see how far they are from us. Second, we look for opportunities and calculate their distance. *How far away is that fruit, that bear, that deer? Is that woman closer to me than that man? How close is that woman standing to that man? How close is that food?*

These are very base-level questions that happen at a deep level. The viewer does not consciously think about it it, but these are processes that immediately happen in the brain.



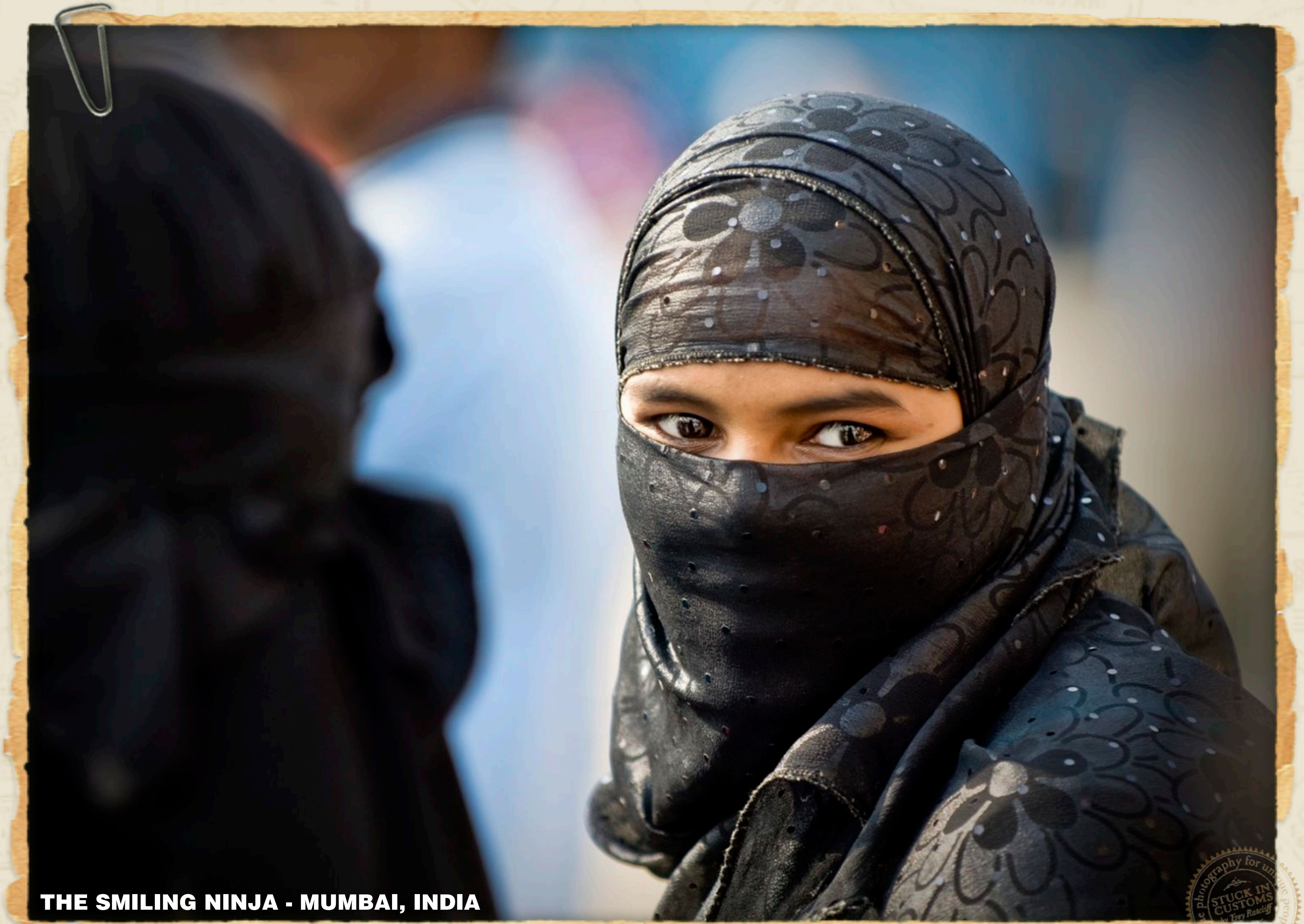
HORSES ON A SUMMER MEADOW

By using the same object (in this case, a horse) in several locations, you can give the viewer a clear indication of the depth in a scene. The viewer will look at this and, without thinking, understand that all the horses are about the same size. So, the brain does not only determine depth, but also the rate of depth-change.



ETHAN PLAYING CROQUET

In this case, a 200-400mm lens was used to help my son "pop" out of a background and establish him in the middle. If you look closely, you will see the foreground at the bottom is also blurry, which helps the brain automatically place him in the middle of the scene.



THE SMILING NINJA - MUMBAI, INDIA

NINJA POP

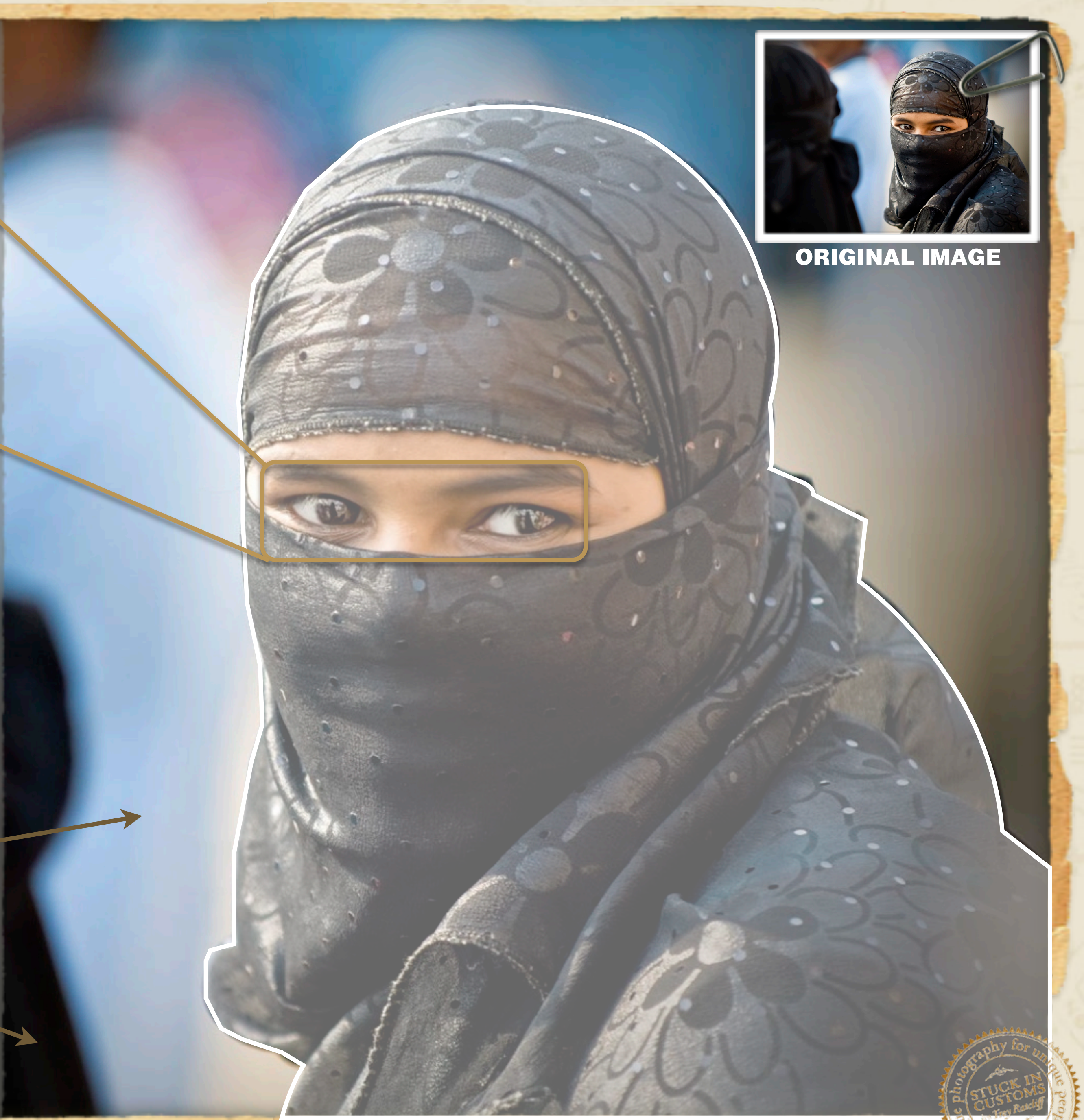
The first rule of ninja photo club is to make sure the eyes are in focus.

The second rule of ninja photo club is to make sure the eyes are in focus. This second rule also applies, of course, to all non-ninja subjects as well, making it a more general-purpose rule.

RULE OF THIRDS

You might have heard of this rule, yes? If you have, and if you have read the rest of this eBook, then you know what I really think of it. Don't use it. Evolve beyond that first-year teaching simplicity, grasshopper.

Not only is the background out of focus because of the Bokeh Effect, but there is some black/white separation, allowing this woman to stand out even more. The second ninja in the distance is enshrouded in more blur, adding to the mystery of the photo.

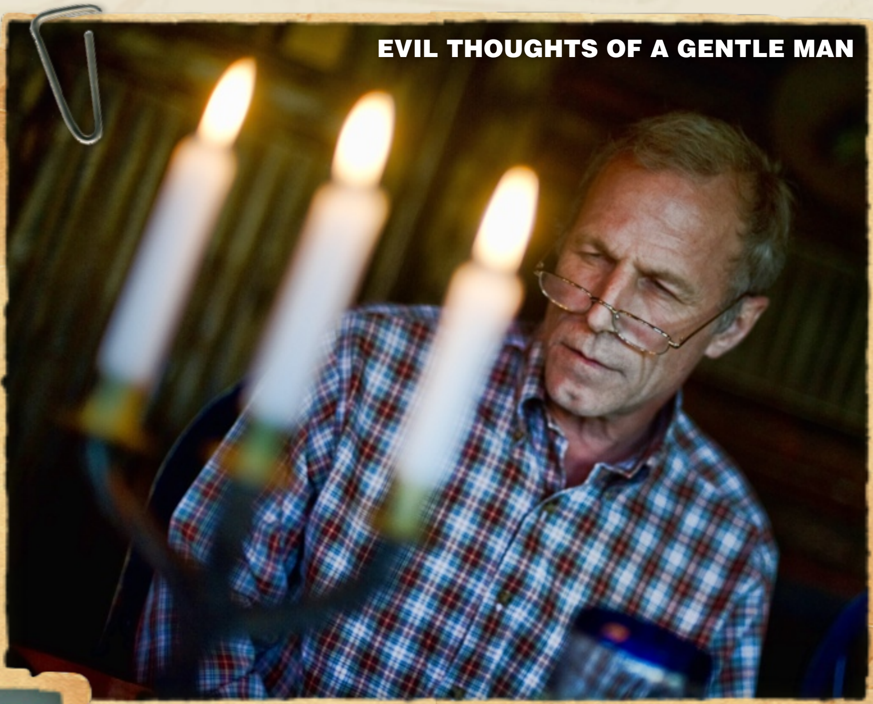


ORIGINAL IMAGE

THREE LEVELS OF DEPTH WITH BOKEH

Now this can be a little tricky. Obviously, by default, you will get two levels. You'll have the main subject who is in focus (we hope), and then the background, which is out of focus. Sometimes, you can come up with an interesting situation where the foreground is out of focus and the background is in focus. This is a more rare condition, but it is possible.

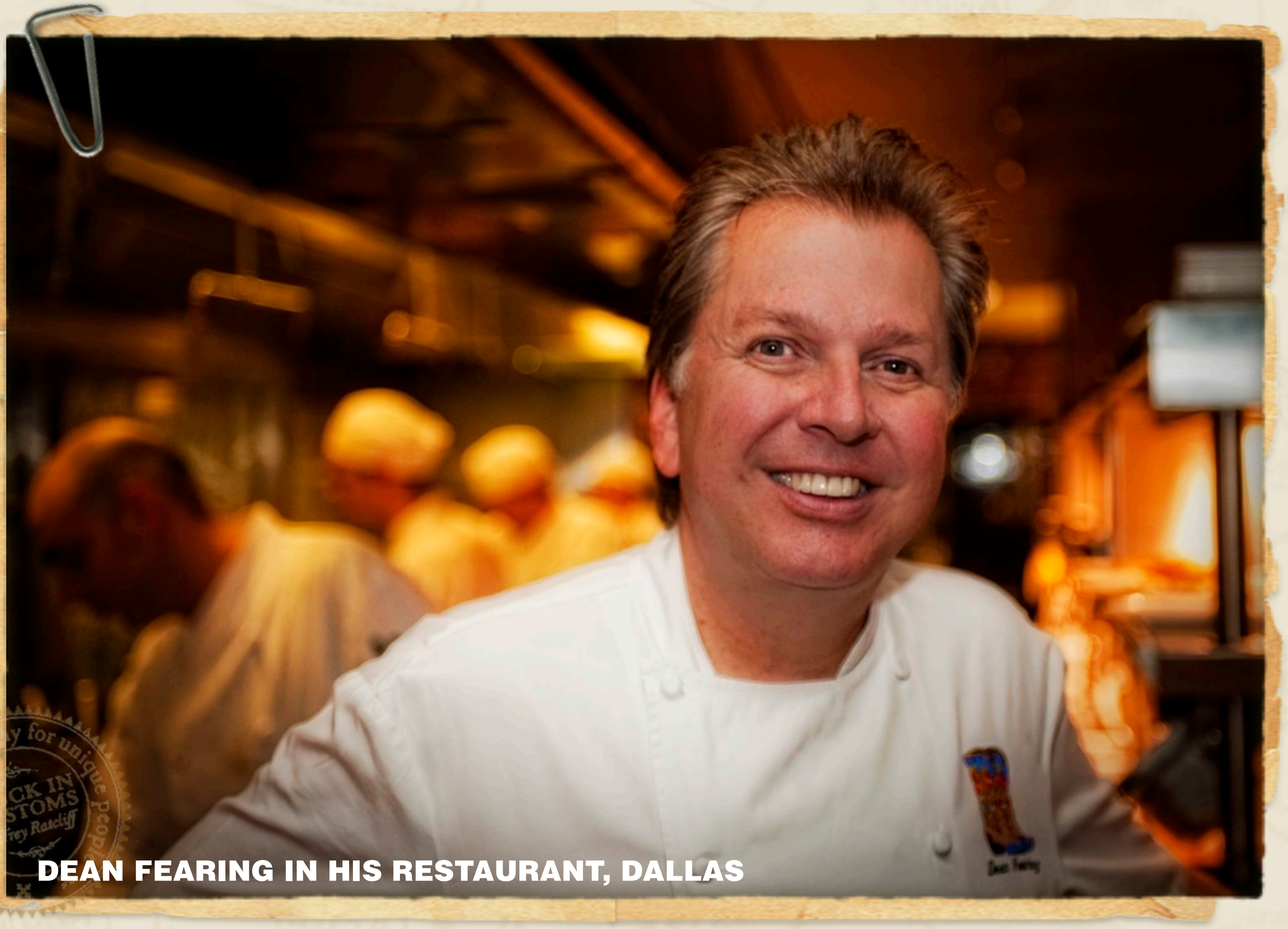
The triple crown of Bokeh is to get an object that is "in the middle" of two blurry subjects. These can be a lot of fun to compose! If it is done well, the viewer will really like it because they are able to sense that one thing is in the middle of two other things. Also, by default, the viewer can tell "how far in between" based on the relative blur levels. Usually, if something is just a little blurred, then it is very close to the object in focus.



EVIL THOUGHTS OF A GENTLE MAN

JULIAN IN MID-PONTIFICATION

Naturally, it's cool to get a setting where the scene has a close object is out-of-focus, the main object is in focus, then a background is out-of-focus again. It's even better if those objects are "contextual" and add to the shot. For example, a blurry rose in the foreground, a happy couple in love, and then a blurry ocean in the background.



DEAN FEARING IN HIS RESTAURANT, DALLAS

CONTEXTUAL COMPOSITION

The example of the chef in the photo to the left falls under the domain of “contextual composition."

Yes, you can always compose objects that are nicely shaped and well-positioned. But if you can get those other objects to have some relation to the main subject, it’s even better.

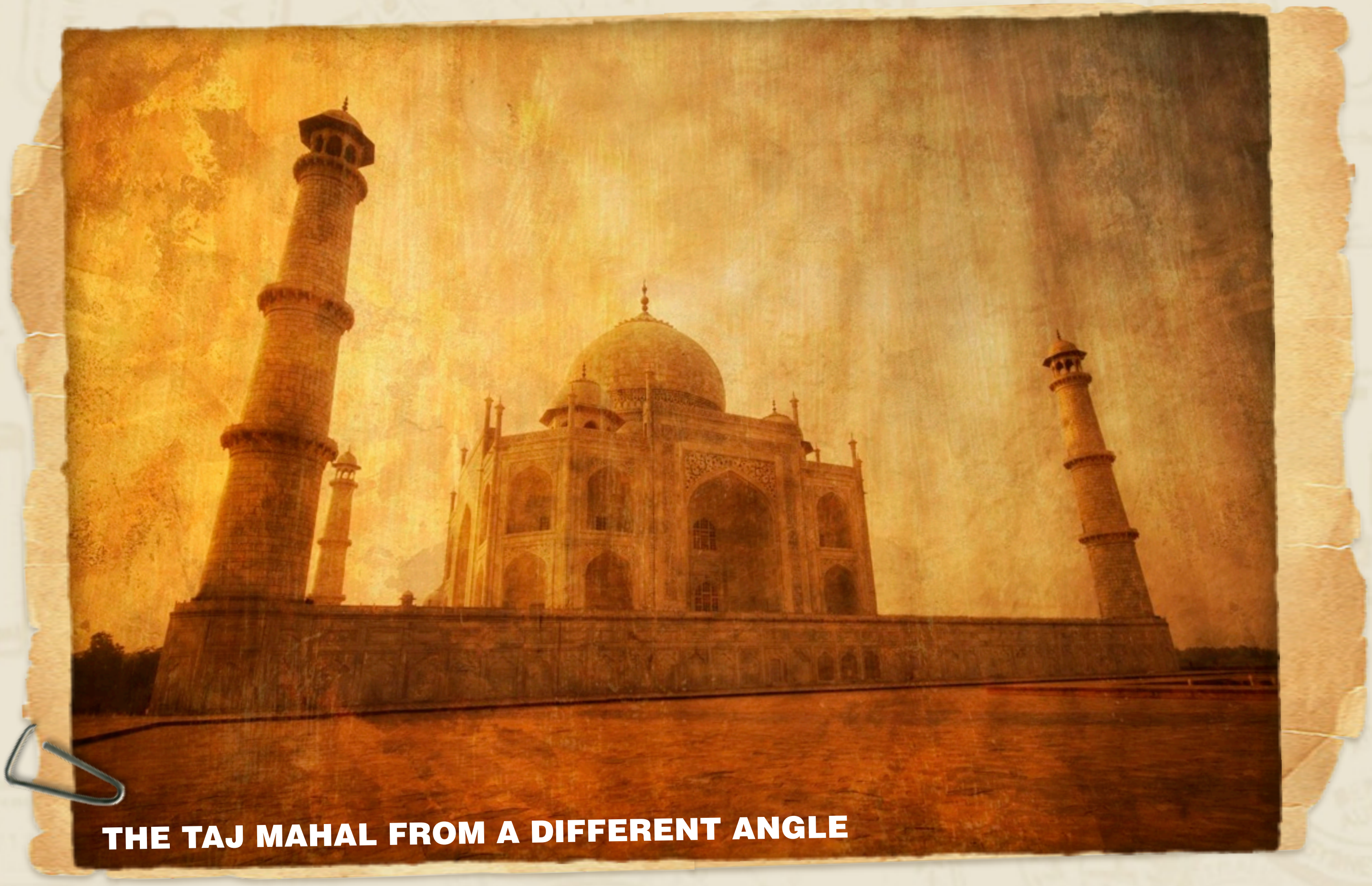
Here is a photo that has a famous chef in Dallas, Texas. I took this while he was in his kitchen, flanked by all of his other chefs. You can clearly see all their hats and all the warm lines point right at the master chef’s face.

Even when not dealing with Bokeh, contextual composition is still something to be keep in the forefront of your mind. If you are at a child’s birthday, and you are looking for an object to help “balance” the photo, it’s better to choose a birthday present rather than a candlestick. Of course, when objects are vastly different, the choice is more obvious. But, you can begin to think of composing these objects as a bit of fun. Is it better to include the birthday present, the messy piece of cake, the complete piece of cake, or the best friend? Maybe, sometimes, there is no "better" or "worse,” just different.

GOLDEN NUGGET OF TRUTH

GNOT

Just because you can make everything SUPER blurry does not mean you must. Sometimes, if things get too blurry, they lose all their meaning and lose any contextual relevance they might have once had.



THE TAJ MAHAL FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE

"JUST DIFFERENT" VERSUS GRADATIONS OF PERFECTION

A master's eye will always be considering the meta-analysis of photography.

That is, you will always be keenly aware of your attitude and approach to a photograph, even while fully in the moment. Imagine yourself a sorcerer, with the ability to have multiple cogent cycles of thought, each of which is completely compartmentalized, yet being aware of one another with a delicate tether of meta-information.

While composing a photo, keep a steady tally of the main objects involved with the composition. Keep ranking them as "more interesting" and "less interesting." Imagine you are at the eye-doctor with the old "better/worse" test. You know, when the doctors perform this test, they have multiple levels of testing to make sure you are consistent. Sometimes people just say "better" or "worse" without even really knowing -- they just feel pressured to say these things. So, doctors have come up with a system to make sure there is consistency so they don't prescribe the wrong thing.

“JUST DIFFERENT” (CONT’D)

The way you can be your own eye-doctor when composing is to recall the transitive property of numbers. You might remember from high-school algebra the notion that if A is greater than B, and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C. Inevitably, you'll be dealing with various objects in your photo. As you move around to consider the composition of these objects, you will be choosing whether or not to include them. Perhaps you will be considering how prominent of an "actor" to make the object in the scene. If you are looking at three objects in a scene, you may determine that Actor One is better than two. And Actor Two is better than Actor Three. Check yourself to ensure that Actor One is better than Actor Three.

It's not always that easy. Maybe combining Actor One and Actor Three is stronger than Actor Two alone. It will behoove you to be somewhat scientific and analytical when putting together a scene. This needs to work in concert with your artistic side without skipping a beat. That is, you need to artistically assess the scene and then scientifically rank it against other scenes. This interplay between the left and right brain is a tremendous challenge and quite fun.

You might think this sounds like "overkill,” but I ask you to reconsider the days and weeks great painters went through when putting together a still life. Every object has its own beautiful place. If you are lazy, the viewer will know. Some people cannot tell the difference between a thinking photographer and a lazy photographer. But those people do not matter. The people that matter can tell when you are being lazy.

They can tell.

THE HORSESHOE

Co-terminously you must be aware that sometimes there is no better or worse, just "different." How can you tell these situations? It is impossible to put into words without slipping into a poetic mode. But, perhaps you can think of two things in your life that are inherently "unrankable." You love them both, and they are simply "different."

The Good News is that once you are able to know one thing is simply "different" from another, then you suddenly have two photos instead of just one! Remember, something that has not been mentioned here is the reason for this whole exercise. It is simply the discipline of knowing when to take the shot. If you have one thing that is better than the next, try not to take the "worse" shot. It's a waste! It's sloppy, and if you know it's not as good as the other shot at the time, there is no need to take it. But, if you can determine that you can capture the same subject in two different conditions - not better or worse - just different - then you can shoot away. Do you see the difference?

Now, this doesn't mean that you won't come home with 10 shots of that perfect cheesecake, sit down in Lightroom, and then choose the best one out of 10. I think many of us still will do that. But our goal is to come home with less and less photos. Just think. You COULD have come home with 500 photos of that cheesecake, right? Congratulate yourself for being able to filter out 490 of them on the scene. That is no small accomplishment, and it feels like the right direction for things to go, doesn't it?

IMMIGRATION AUSTRALIA
2 APR 1997
DEPARTED AUSTRALIA
SYDNEY AIRPORT 1817

COMPOSING WITH TIME

I love the concept of time. I will really really try not to get too philosophical about time, because I do not want to get too far afield. However, considering the nature of time in an artistic sense is almost impossible for me to ignore in the discussion of composition.

Time is inscrutable. I've seen interesting studies that are horribly confusing about the nature of time in math and extra dimensions. It is even postulated that there are two dimensions of time, and the one we experience is merely the shadow of the actual time. In this sense, that is why we find time so hard to grasp. Some things take seem to take forever, and some things happen too fast.

THE LONELY TRINITY

HEARST GUEST HOUSE AT SUNSET, SAN SIMEON

Perhaps we are a bit like fish. There is an old philosophical chestnut that a fish would never be able to discover the water in which it swims. It doesn't need to -- much like we don't need to understand the time in which we live. We just swim in it, and it is what it is.

But, as photographers, don't we have a different sense of time? Don't we feel the edges of a truth about time that seems to escape other people?

Freezing time in a photograph can be a little glimpse of heaven - a bit of understanding of a shadowy truth of ineluctable purity.

> *"Regarding time, photographers are a rare species of fish that get to see the water in which they swim."*

TAKE PHOTOS WITH TIME

When you are setting up for your photo, remember that the time is probably fairly arbitrary. You might have chosen the time, or maybe you are simply in the moment with your camera. But you can always think about how a given scene might look at a different time. If it is an organic subject, like a human or a flower, maybe THIS is indeed to time to take a photo. These organic things do flow like a river, and they are never the same twice.

Conversely, a static object like a barn, a surfboard leaning on a wall, or an old rusting car will not change on its own. But time will change around it. While you are there, try to picture that scene during various times of the day and in multiple weather conditions.

Look. It's a shiny red boy's bike. It's in the beating sun at noon. It's alone in the rain at 3 PM. When did you take your photo? Why?

ICELAND HORSE IN THE WILD

As you choose your subjects and consider the time around it, think about how organic and inorganic subjects deal with time. One moves through time and the other has time wrapped around it. These are interesting ideas to capture in your compositions. There is no answer, but as you consider it more and more, you will find that you get magical and unexpected glimpses into the ultimate truth of the matter.

Put saturated colors close to desaturated colors. The eye needs a break. If you do not give your viewer's retina a chance to rest and recharge, they will look away from the whole photo entirely.

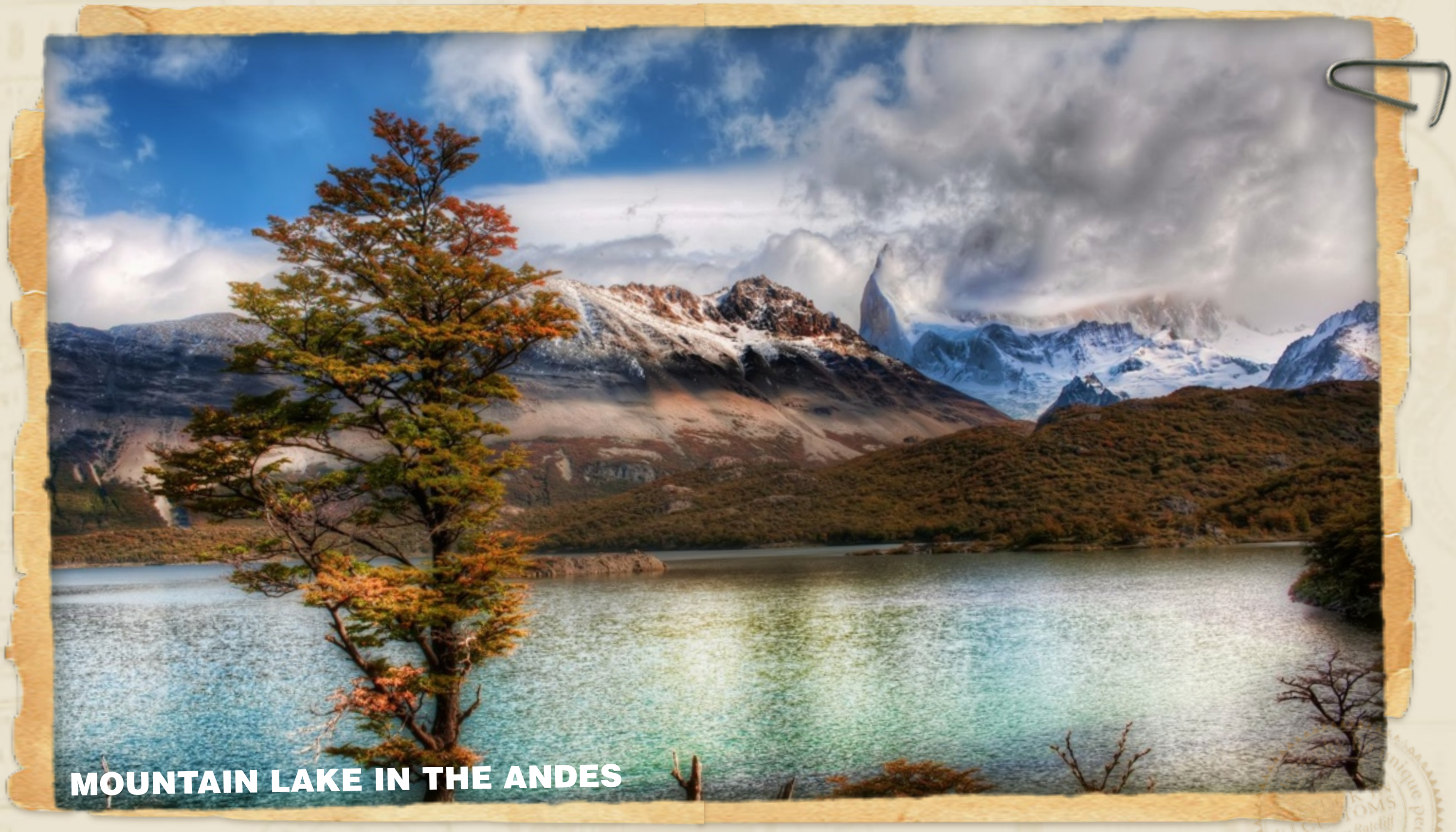
OUT OF AFRICA

You have read this far haven't you? I am glad the previous bit was not too philosophically tiresome for you. These are all things I think about, and I hope to throw these new patterns into your cauldron to stir up your creative juices.

To reward you for sticking with me so long, here is something that is endlessly PRACTICAL!

Even though I believe in engaging in various concepts in your mind while making photos, I do understand that this is difficult. Sometimes people just want Step 1, Step 2, Step 3. This annoys me to no end... this is the way people are taught to change a tire, wrap a present, etc -- not change an artistic life.

Although, having said that, I can tell you something infinitely and immediately usable. And after, I'll give you all kinds of wonderful explanation beyond it!


MOUNTAIN LAKE IN THE ANDES

GNOT

Golden Nugget of Truth

In a landscape, the more of the following elements you include, the more happy it makes the viewer: Fresh water, meadows, mountains, distant sky, forest, and sometime pathways.

WHAT ON EARTH???

Is it really as simple as the nugget above? Yes! I'll prove it with empirical data and epistemological rigor. And, it does all have to do with the Earth itself.

OUR UNDEVELOPED BRAINS

There have been fascinating experiments in this space of "what do people like to see?" A series of photos were shown to children in various environments around the world. They chose children from SE Asia, Scandinavia, Central America, Africa, Peru, etc. These children had only lived in one place their entire life and never traveled.

Researchers showed these children various photos and asked, "Where would you like to live?" The photos included nice photos of a beach with palm trees, a deep forest with a lot of trees, a sparsely vegetated desert with wide vistas, a downtown urban environment like Dallas, and a savanna scene. Which one did they choose? Overwhelmingly, they chose the savanna scene.

PATAGONIA LANDSCAPE

FRESHWATER WATERFALL, ICELAND

That photo featured a wide meadow, a fresh water lake, mountains in the distance with wide skies above, and a forest off to the side with a path leading in its direction.

Why do we like to see these things? It is deeply rooted in our Pleistocene ancestors, which was not all that long ago, speaking in terms of genetic and developmental history.

Do you ever wonder about why something is the way it is? If you are over 30, then you tend to wonder more than you should. If you are under 30, you are more apt to jump on Wikipedia and figure it out. So, be like my son and do research to broaden your knowledge on the subject. *Remember, you learn this stuff not to be more interesting to other people -- but to be more interesting to yourself.*

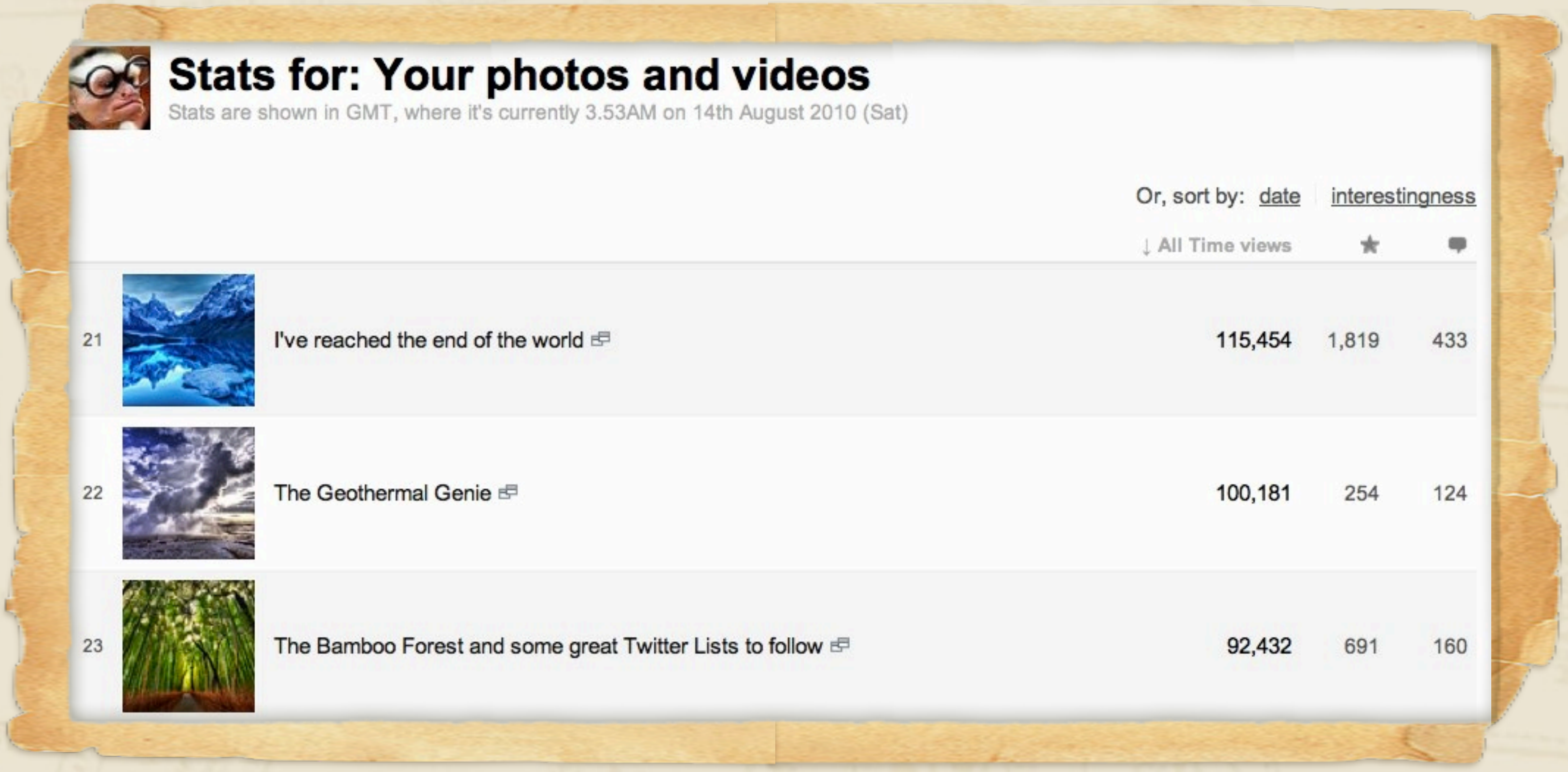
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

I have well over 20 million views on my Flickr photos. Every day I put up a new photo (even though now I use SmugMug for various reasons -- see my [SmugMug review](#)). Over the past five years, I've done a daily experiment on what people like to see in their photos.

I get immediate feedback about what is successful in a photo. It's not random! Yes, there are random events like "Getting on the front page of Flickr" that can mess up the data, but I can also remove those from the sampling. Indications of a successful or interesting photo are: Total views, total comments, length and thoughtfulness of the comments, favorites, tags, photo embeds on other websites, and the like.

Inevitably, the more elements I include in a photo (meadow, fresh water, big skies, forest, and paths) I include, the more successful it is! Are we really that simple? Yes I think so!

Now, when I go out to take photos, do I think about all those elements? No, not really. I think I am just drawn to these things, like all people Often times, after getting home, I see all these elements and I am once again reminded of the interesting science behind it all.



Stats for: Your photos and videos

Stats are shown in GMT, where it's currently 3.53AM on 14th August 2010 (Sat)

Or, sort by: date | interestingness

		↓ All Time views	★	💬
21	I've reached the end of the world	115,454	1,819	433
22	The Geothermal Genie	100,181	254	124
23	The Bamboo Forest and some great Twitter Lists to follow	92,432	691	160

BOATS ON A LAKE, HONGZHOU

FRESH GLACIER LAKE, PATAGONIA

WHY WE LIKE THESE KEY ELEMENTS IN LANDSCAPE PHOTOS

MEADOWS

Predators. This is always the first thing humans assess in new situations. What threats are there? How far are they? If so, what are my possible escape routes? In fact, this is not just what humans think, but almost every living creature. They first look at threats before opportunities.

FRESH WATER LAKE

Humans like to know there is an immediate and nearby source of fresh water. Rivers also work. The more clear or "cool" the water, the more we like to see it. Humans basically need to have fresh water several times a day, so it should be in close walking distance.

MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE

This gives us a sense of scale and time. We have a wide vista to know many things that are happening, and we have a sense of incoming weather. Whenever possible, we like to have knowledge of incoming changes to the weather. Haven't you ever wondered why a first topic of conversation in every culture around the world is the "weather"? It is something every human is very concerned with, even though now most of us have shelter and can control temperature indoors. Why wouldn't we talk about random things first, like old books or what we are currently smelling? It's always weather! That just goes to prove how important it is to have wide skies in your viewing cone.

THE FIVE KEY ELEMENTS (CONT'D)

A FOREST

We like to know there is the safety of the trees to hide from predators or weather. It is, really, an escape route. The forest is also often a place of shelter and a relatively safe place to live. Furthermore, it serves as a secondary location for potential food stores, such as fruits, nuts, and legumes. Of course, no one really does this any more unless you are camping or a pygmy, but pygmies don't read eBooks.

A PATH

A path often indicates two important things. First, it indicates that humans or other game is nearby in numbers large enough to form a path. Second, humans enjoy visualizing their eventual path through an environment. They like to envision walking this way and that. Exploring over in one direction for berries and another for game. Essentially, we are all still explorers, and the more options there are for exploration in a scene, the better!

FOG THROUGH THE TREES, YELLOWSTONE

PATHS THROUGH CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK

IN CLOSING

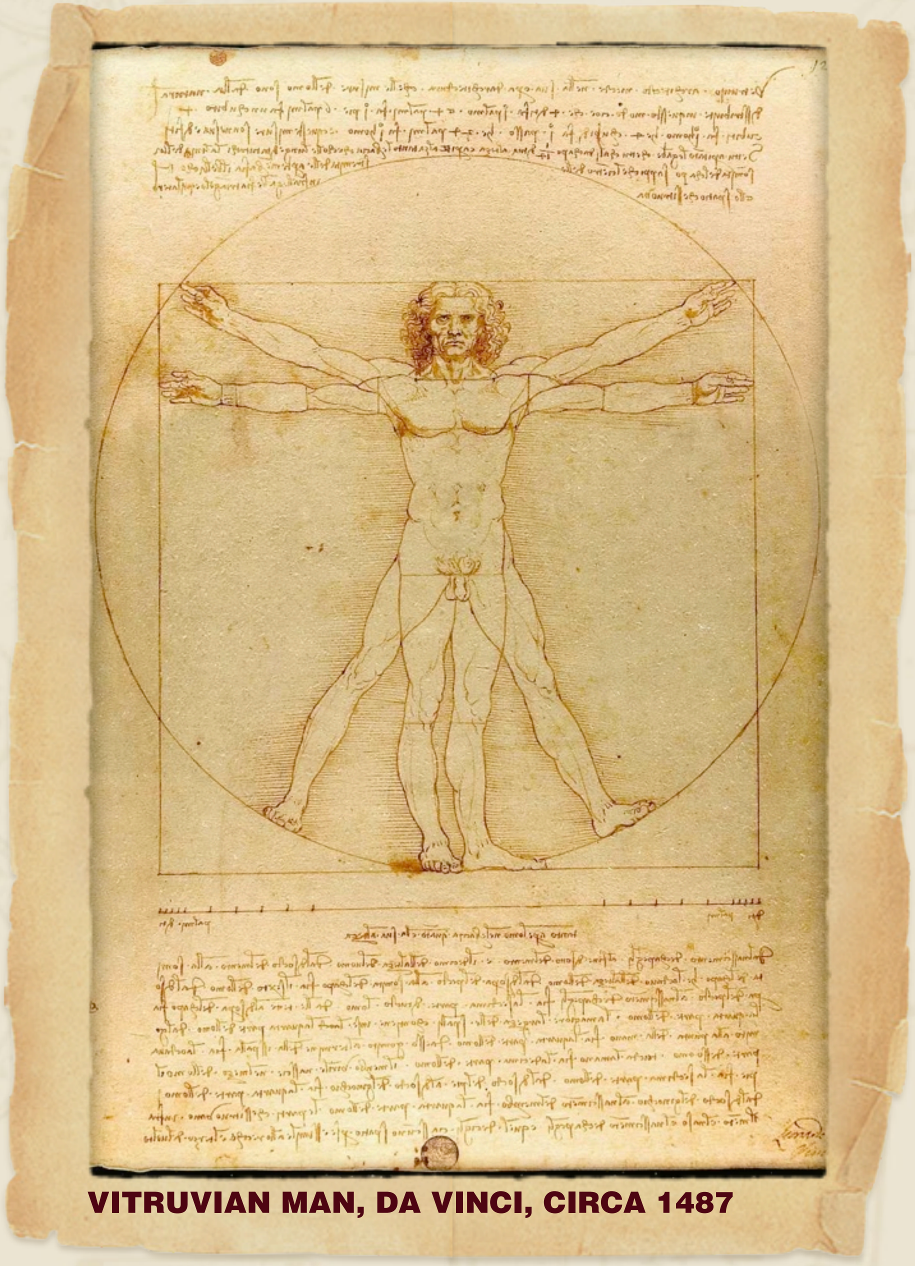
I hope these tips have helped you have many more ideas and thoughts around composing all sorts of photos. From people to objects to landscape, we are all still learning. The process of learning and thinking about the art is important to consider. I'm a firm believer that deep thinking combined with reacting to artistic instincts is a powerful force for composition. I invite you to continue to push yourself into uncomfortable areas and think in new fresh ways.

Learn all you can and struggle to wrap the world around you.

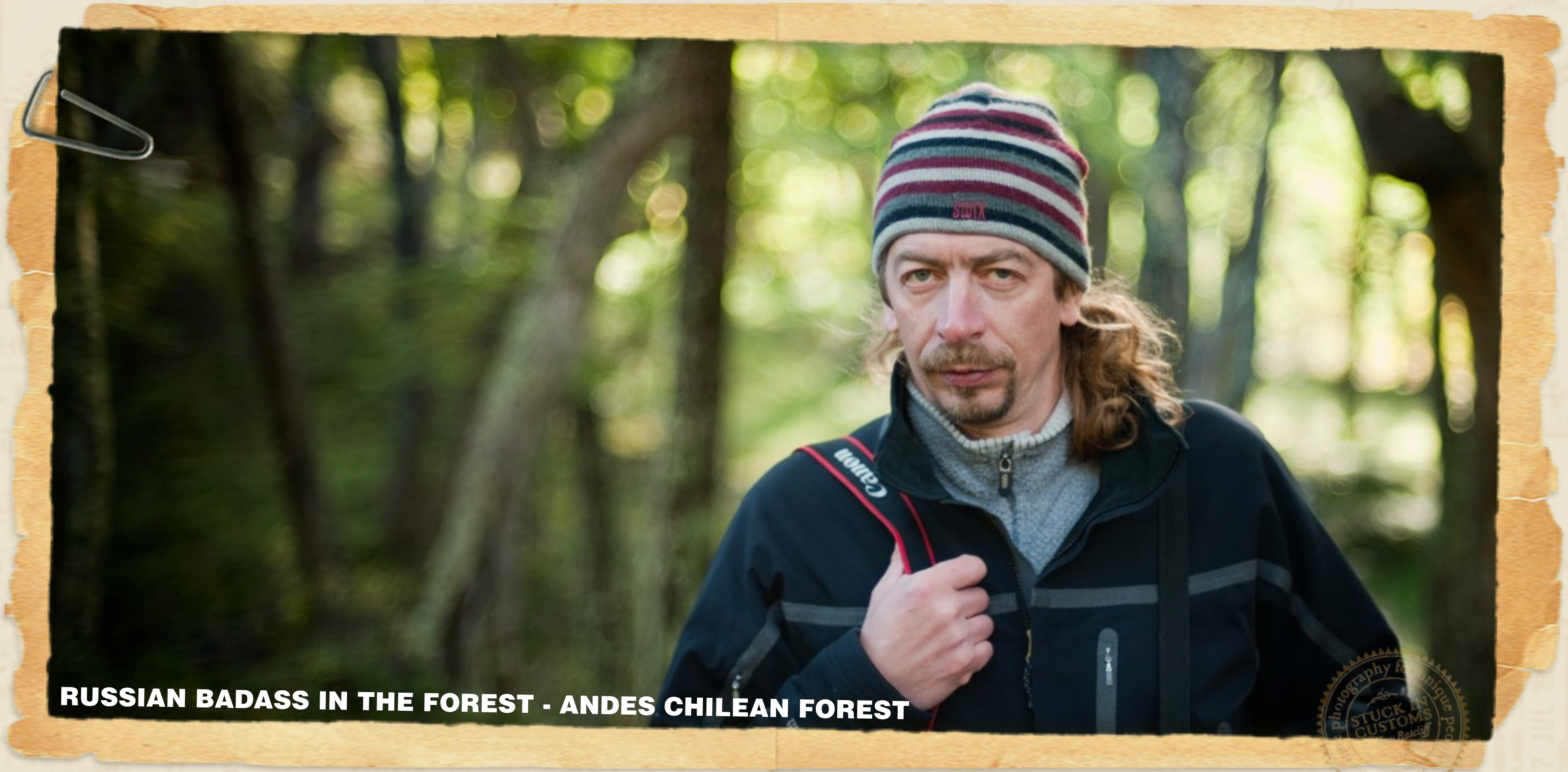
The photography, in the end, is about you, and you alone.

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON COMPOSITION

What follows is a collection of photos, thoughts, cropping, and other tidbits to give you more ideas and notions in your own personal quest.



VITRUVIAN MAN, DA VINCI, CIRCA 1487



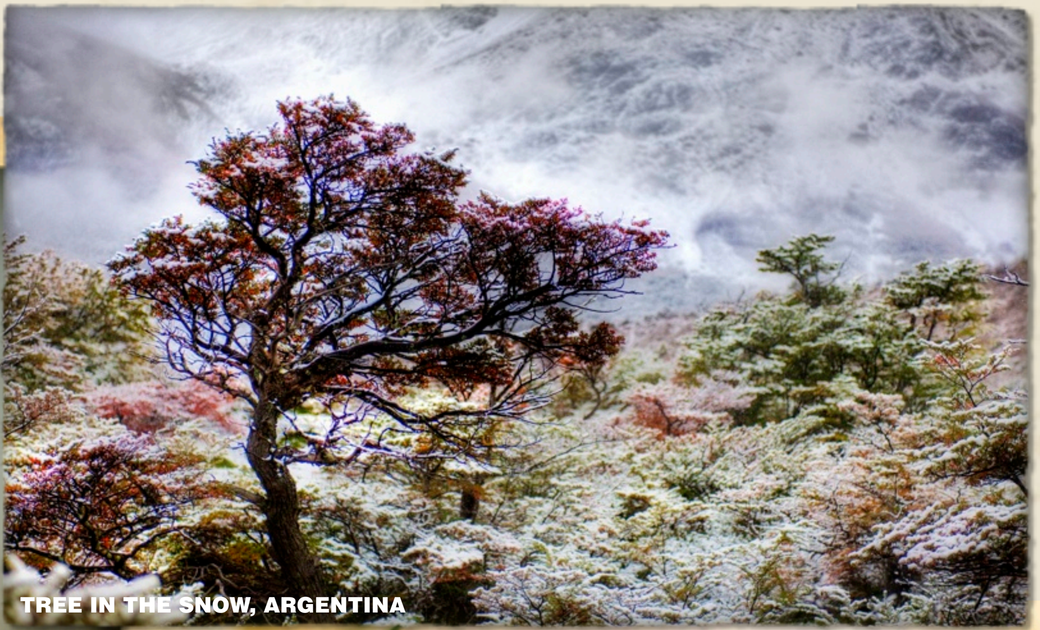
RUSSIAN BADASS IN THE FOREST - ANDES CHILEAN FOREST

THE CINEMATIC CROP

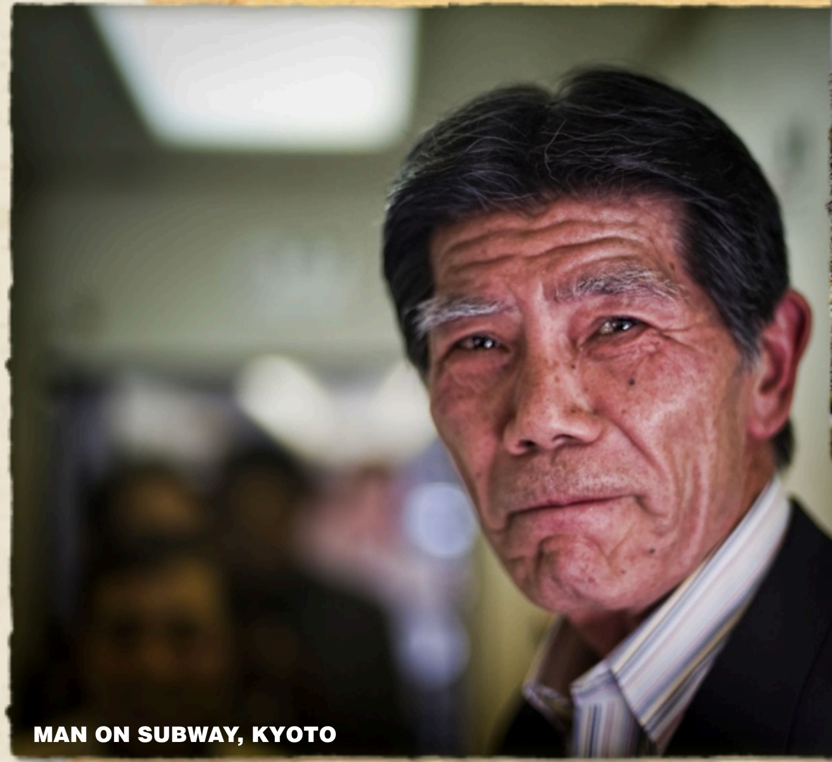
There are certain times when you will want to give your image a 2:1 crop. You may recognize this cropping from the larger-than-life movies. In this image, my Russian friend Vulva was hiking with me whilst wearing a fairly dramatic look. Simply by adding this crop, everything does feel even more dramatic and cinematic. This did require me to crop out a lot of other interesting stuff, such as his camera, the bottom of his jacket, and other tidbits. But what I lost with those details, I gained with a compelling crop.

Also of interest, there was fortunate lighting in that he was backlit while the left part of the forest was dark. Thus, the whole scene undulates from dark to light to dark to light. Thus, the compositional flow of light adds another nice and natural layer of complexity.

CHOOSING WHICH SIDE TO POSITION THE OBJECT

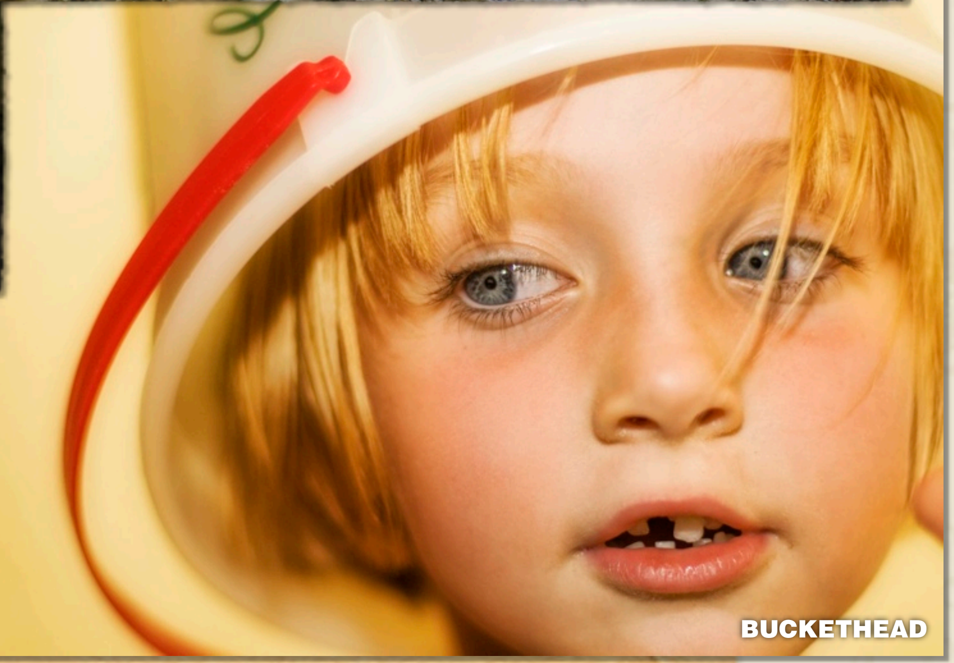


TREE IN THE SNOW, ARGENTINA



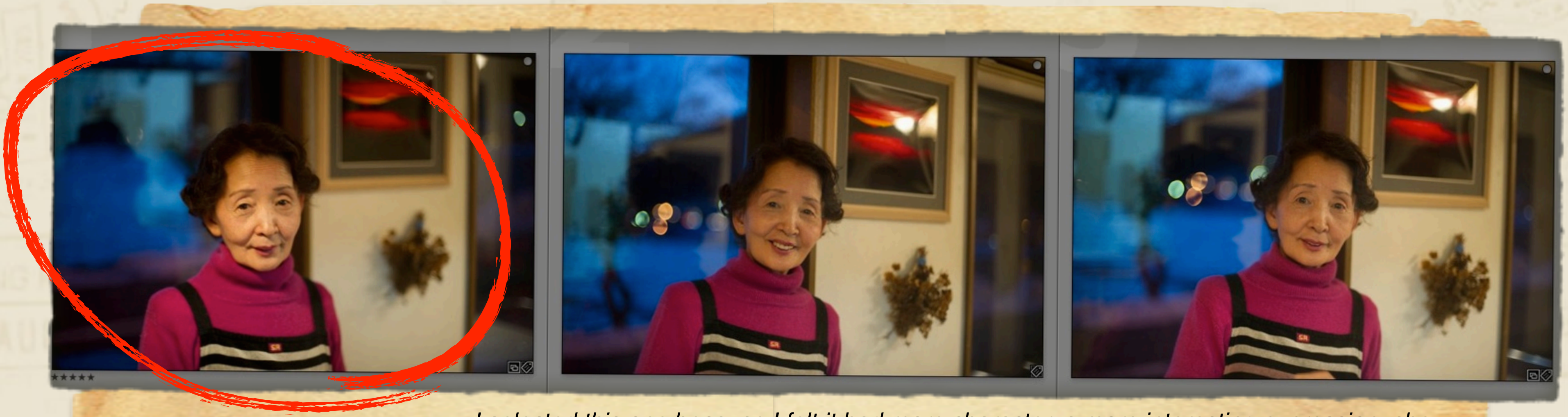
MAN ON SUBWAY, KYOTO

Whether you are including a person or an object -- when that is the MAIN object in the interest in the photo -- always position them off-center. If it is a person, leave more room either in: a) The direction their head is facing or b) the direction in which their eyes are looking. If it is an object like the tree above, then see if the object seems to be "pointing" in a direction. If so, put the extra space on that side of the object.



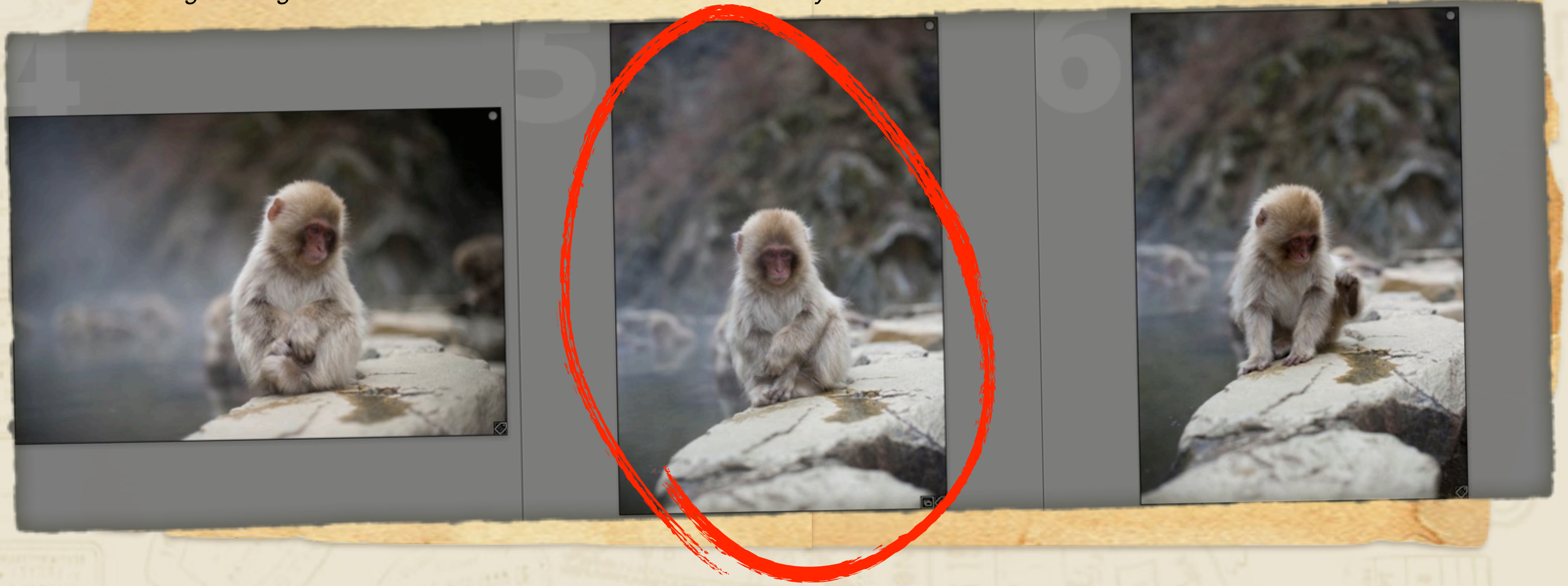
BUCKETHEAD

CHOOSING THE BEST OF THE TAKES



I selected this one because I felt it had more character, a more interesting expression, she was more off to the side, and there were not the distracting lights in the background out the window.

All the monkey shots were interesting, so it is always hard to choose "the best." But it is an important exercise that I go through all the time. I chose the middle one because you could see the face the best.



BEFORE AND AFTER THE CROP

BEFORE THE CROP

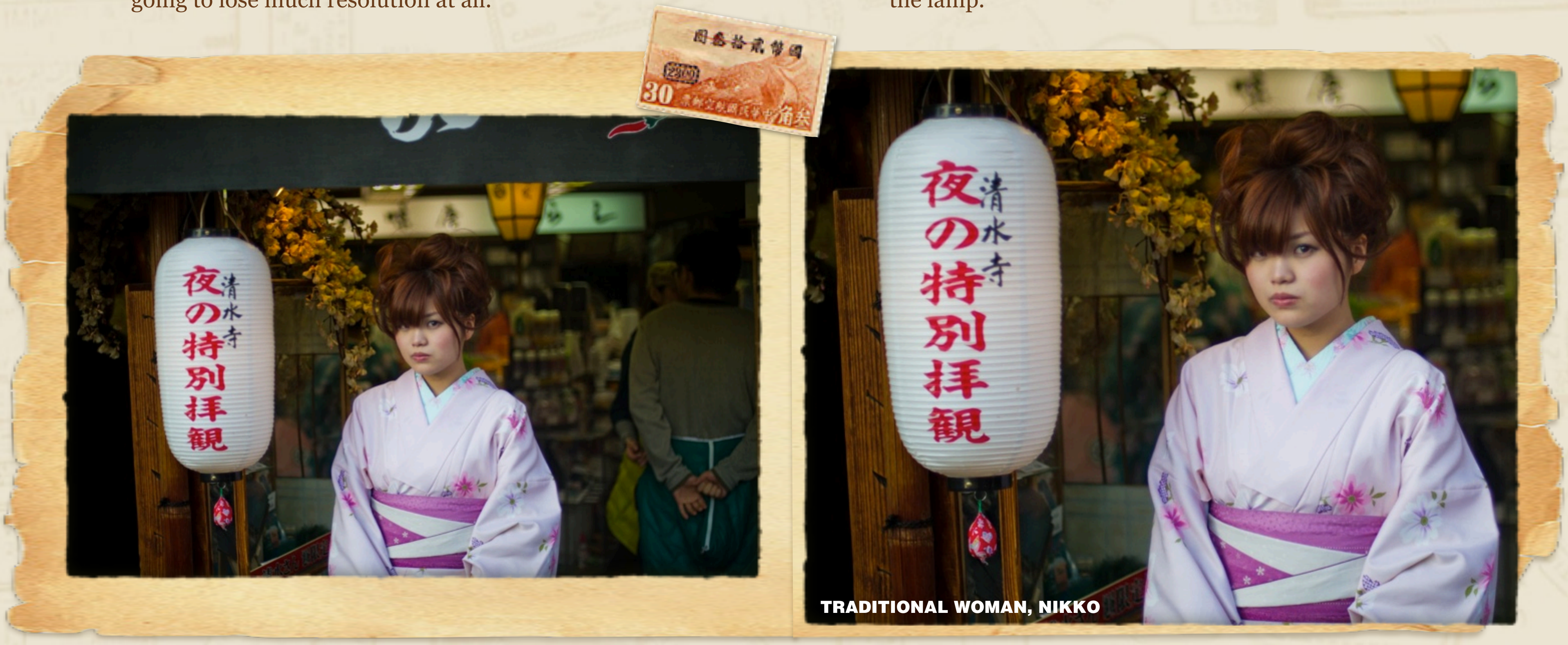
I felt like this shot was just too wide. I grabbed it in a bit of a hurry, since this was not a model. She was simply an interesting-looking woman on the street. Since she was walking towards me, I didn't really have time to set up properly, zoom, and make the perfect composition in camera. This happens.

But, luckily, we can always crop later. Also, because modern cameras have so many megapixels, we aren't going to lose much resolution at all.

AFTER THE CROP

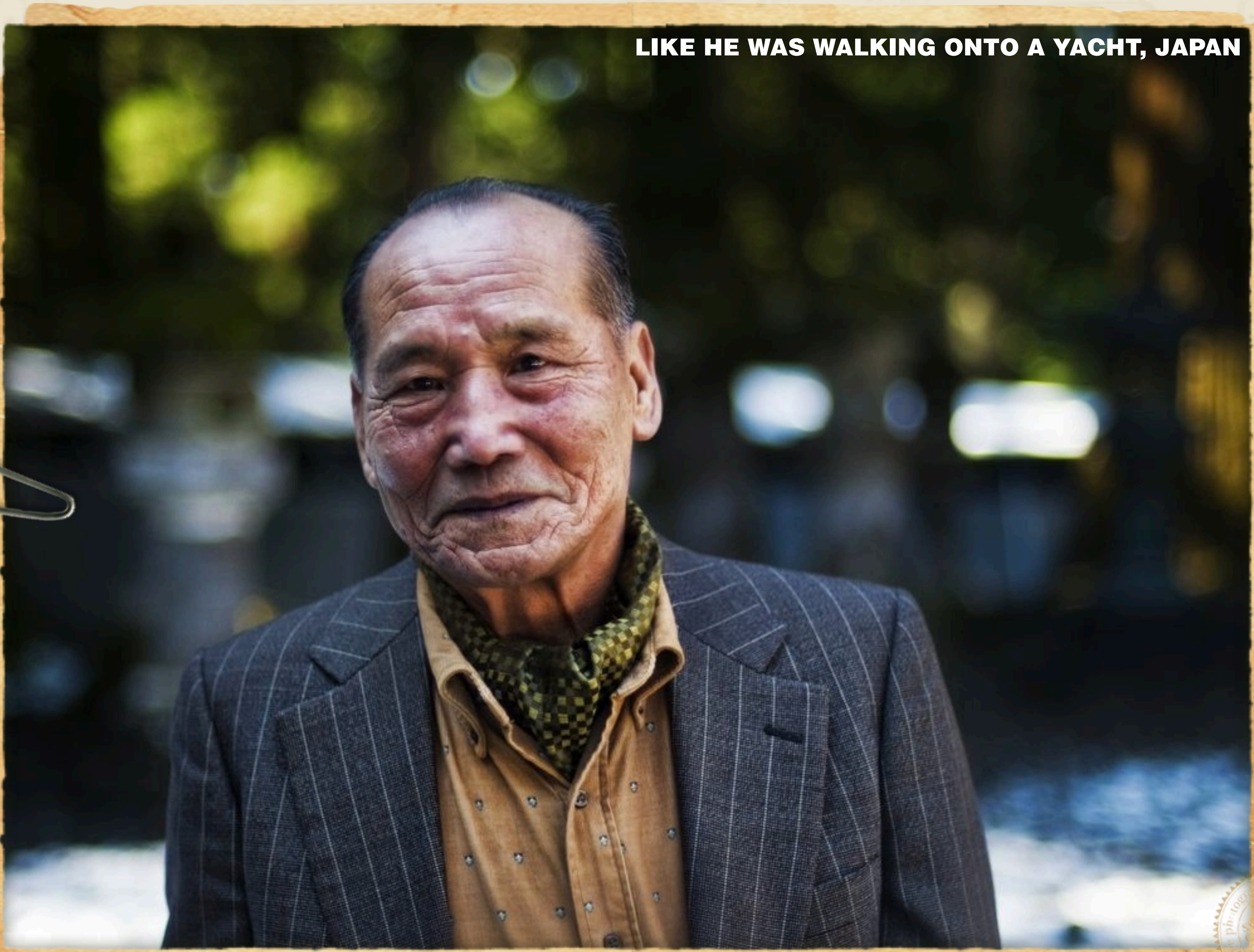
I got in quite a bit tighter, and, in so doing, I changed the aspect ratio a bit. In almost all my photos, my aspect ratio is different. I pay no mind to ensuring it is 4:3 or 16:9 or anything along those lines.

I cropped out the man in the shop and the boring sign on the top. They did not add anything to the photo. By getting in tighter, I put more emphasis on the woman, and tied her to the Japanese writing on the lamp.


夜の特別拝観
清水寺
夜の特別拝観
清水寺

TRADITIONAL WOMAN, NIKKO

CROPPING THE MAN WITH SCARF



LIKE HE WAS WALKING ONTO A YACHT, JAPAN

BEFORE AND AFTER THE CROP

BEFORE THE CROP

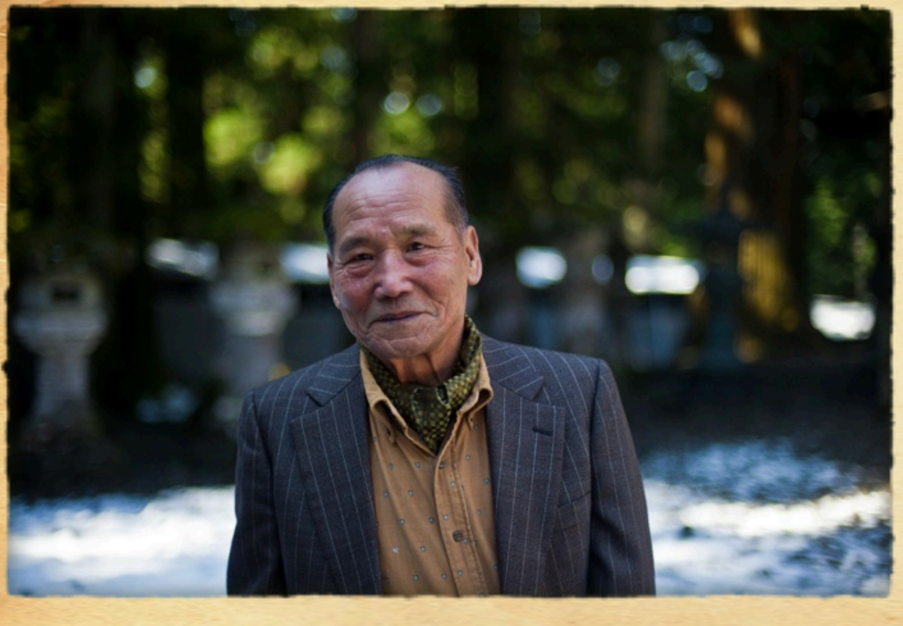
I captured this with a Nikon 50mm lens, and the f-stop was at 1.4. This helped the man to pop off the background and create the Bokeh effect mentioned earlier.

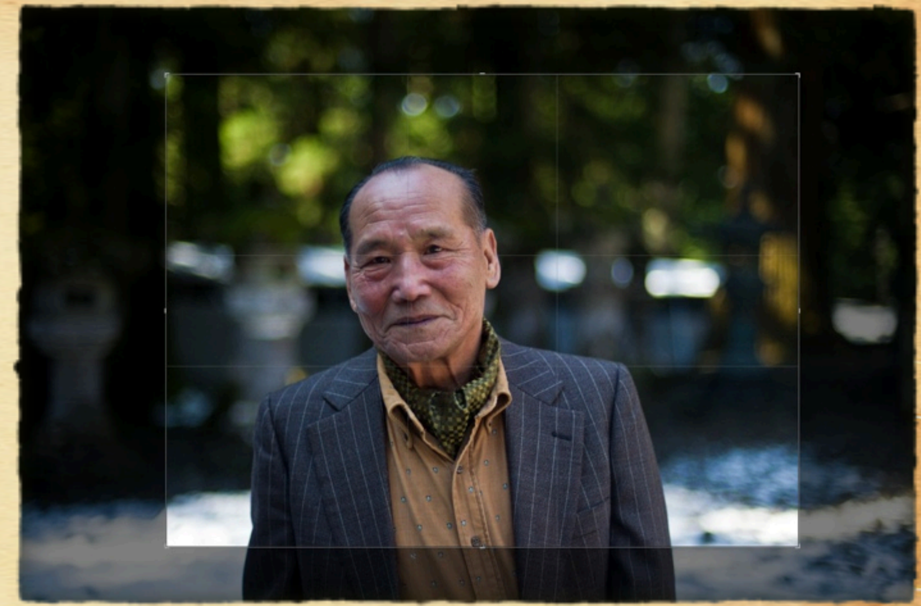
Again, I was a little bit in a hurry, so I didn't have a great chance to compose it in camera. I felt like he was a bit too much in the center of the photo.

AFTER THE CROP

I got in tighter on the subject because the background was too overpowering. It was interesting and nice, but we don't need all that.

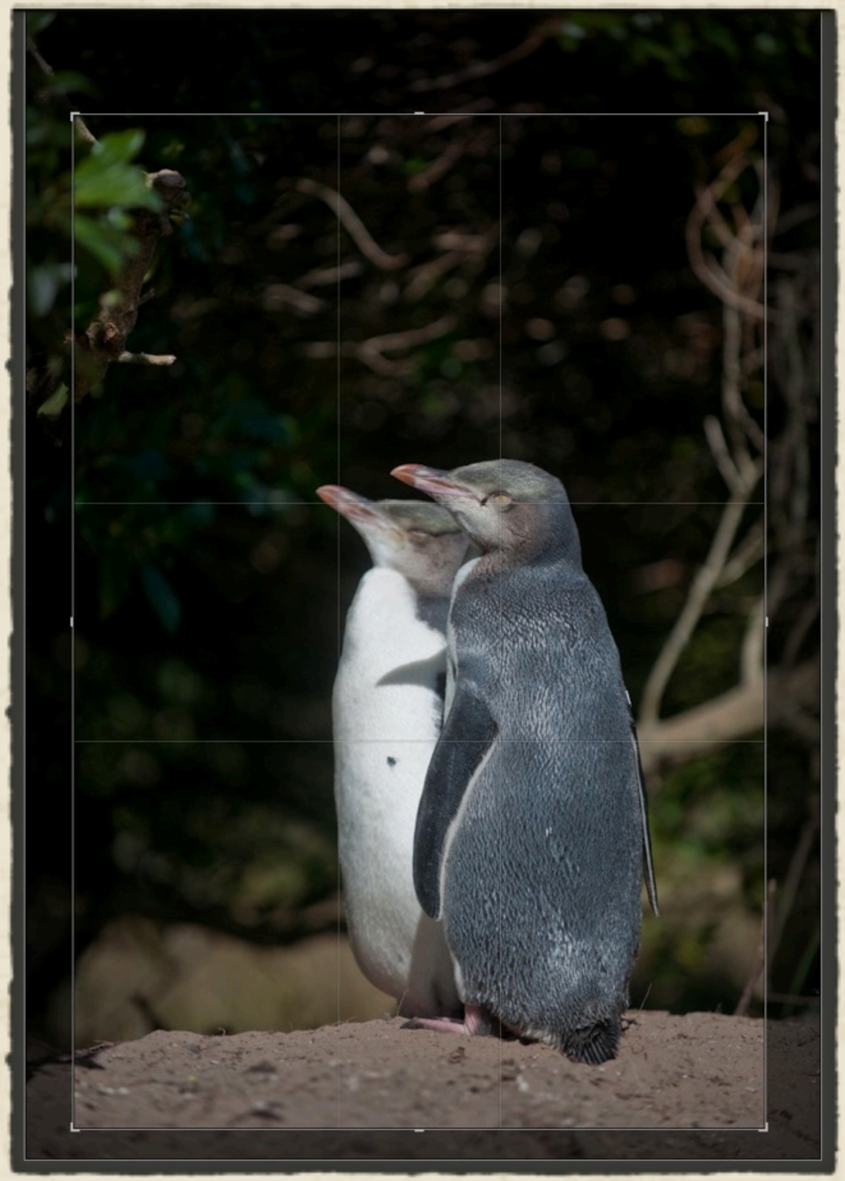
I positioned him a bit off to the left so he was not so much in the center. Remember, if he is just a *tiny bit* off center, then it looks like a mistake. He needs to be moved over to one side or the other with conviction!





Zoom in closely to see the lines of Phi on top of the cropping area.

BEFORE AND AFTER PENGUINS



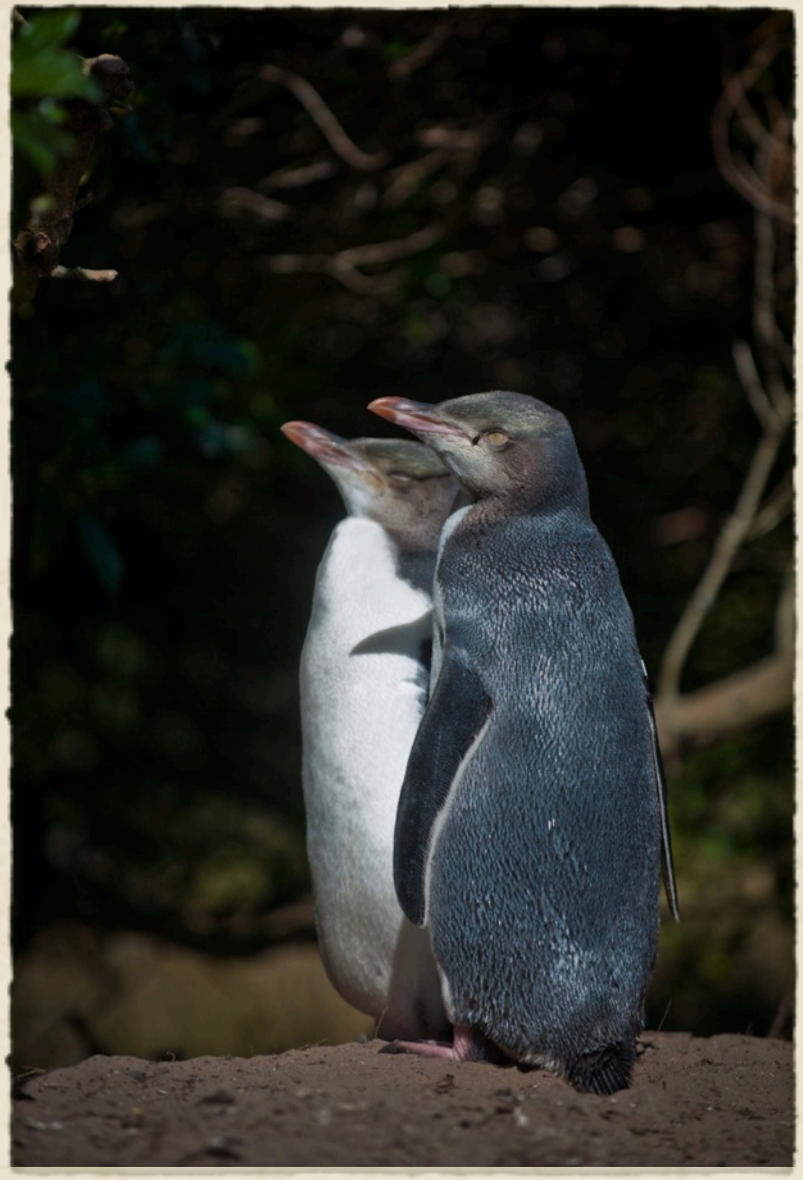
BEFORE THE CROP

This picture was just about perfect already, but a few cropping tweaks were necessary. You can zoom in on the "before" shot on the left to see the lines of the Golden Ratio atop.

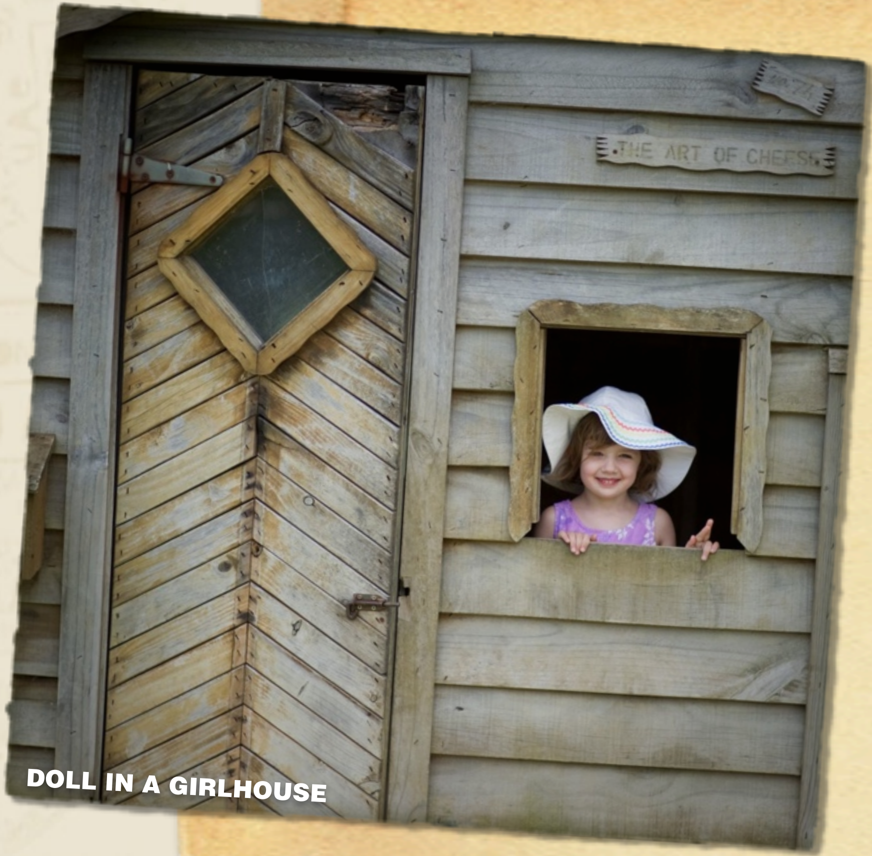
AFTER THE CROP

Now the penguin's eyes are lined up along the top horizontal line of Phi. Also, by getting in tighter, we got rid of some of the annoying foliage that was in the background, causing unnecessary busy distractions.

I also got rid of that annoying fly on the 2nd penguin... because no one wants their pretty pretty penguin shots with a dirty fly mucking them up!



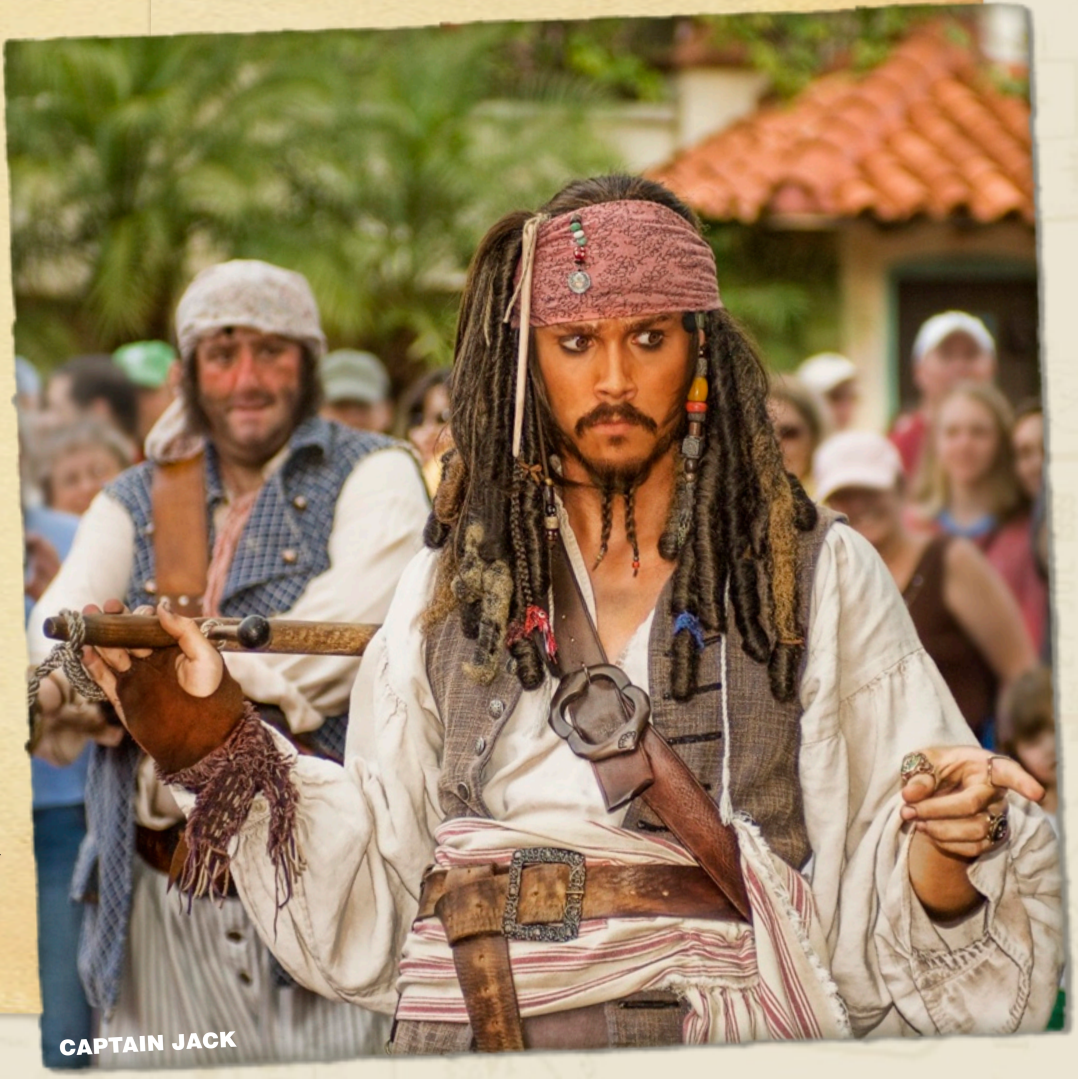
TIPS ON PEOPLE SHOTS



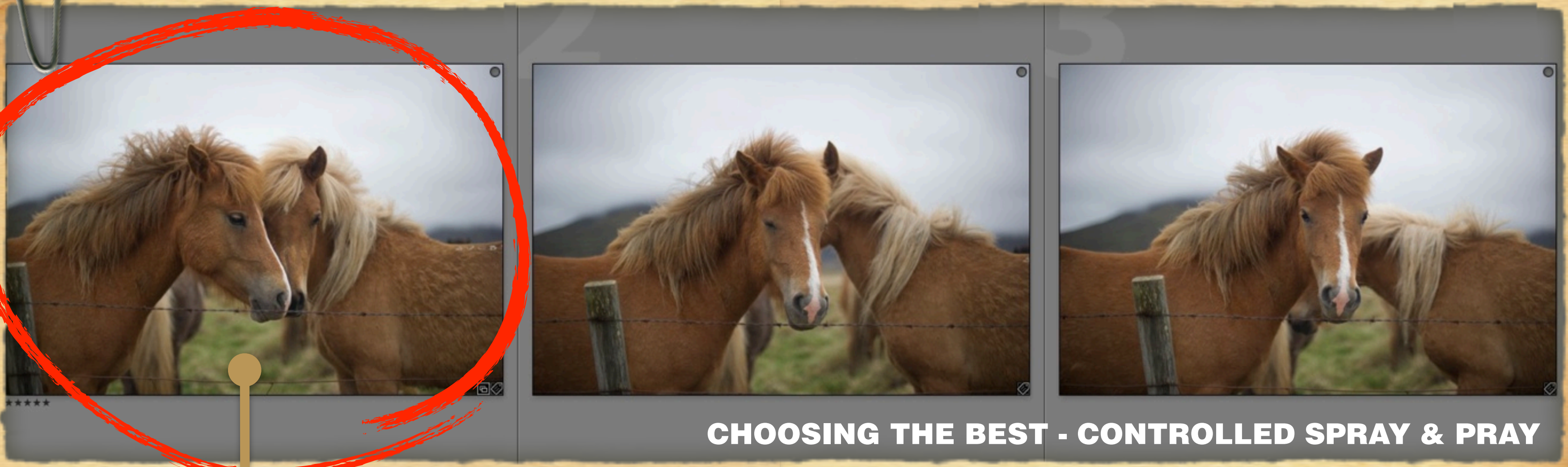
DOLL IN A GIRLHOUSE

When putting people in photos, it's sometimes fun to create a context for them. This can be a challenge, but also quite fun. Above, I love the square window, and that would have been enough. But, I also wanted it to be clear she was in a playhouse, and I wanted to figure out a way to incorporate the diamond-shaped window and the square

If you have two people in a photo, and one is more important than the other one, do your best to: a) get the more important person in front and b) make the more important person in focus. Also, remember NOT to do this if you are taking photos of kids or people where they are all equally important.

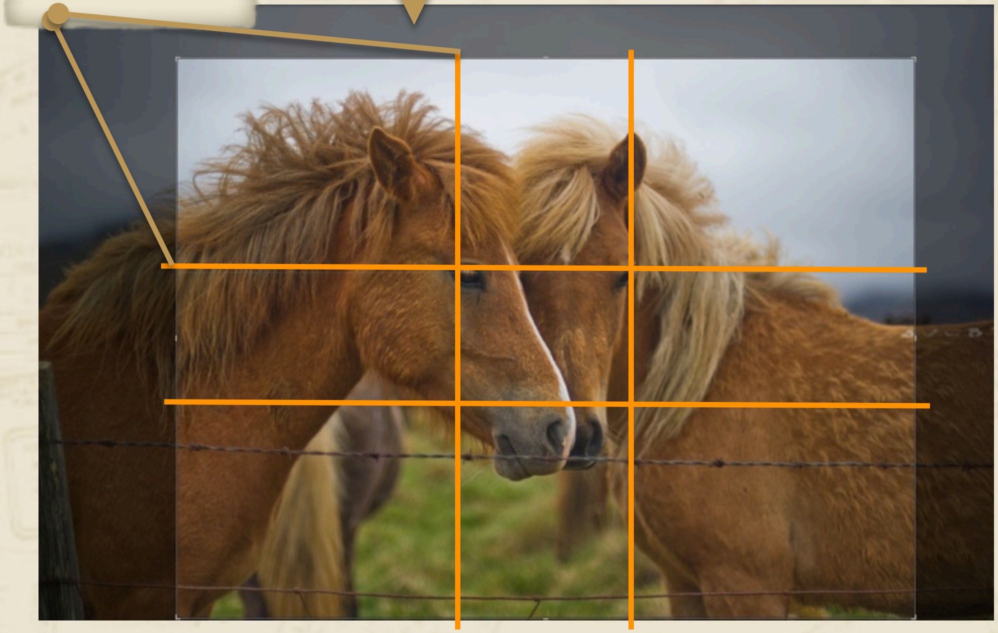


CAPTAIN JACK



CHOOSING THE BEST - CONTROLLED SPRAY & PRAY

The rule of Phi.

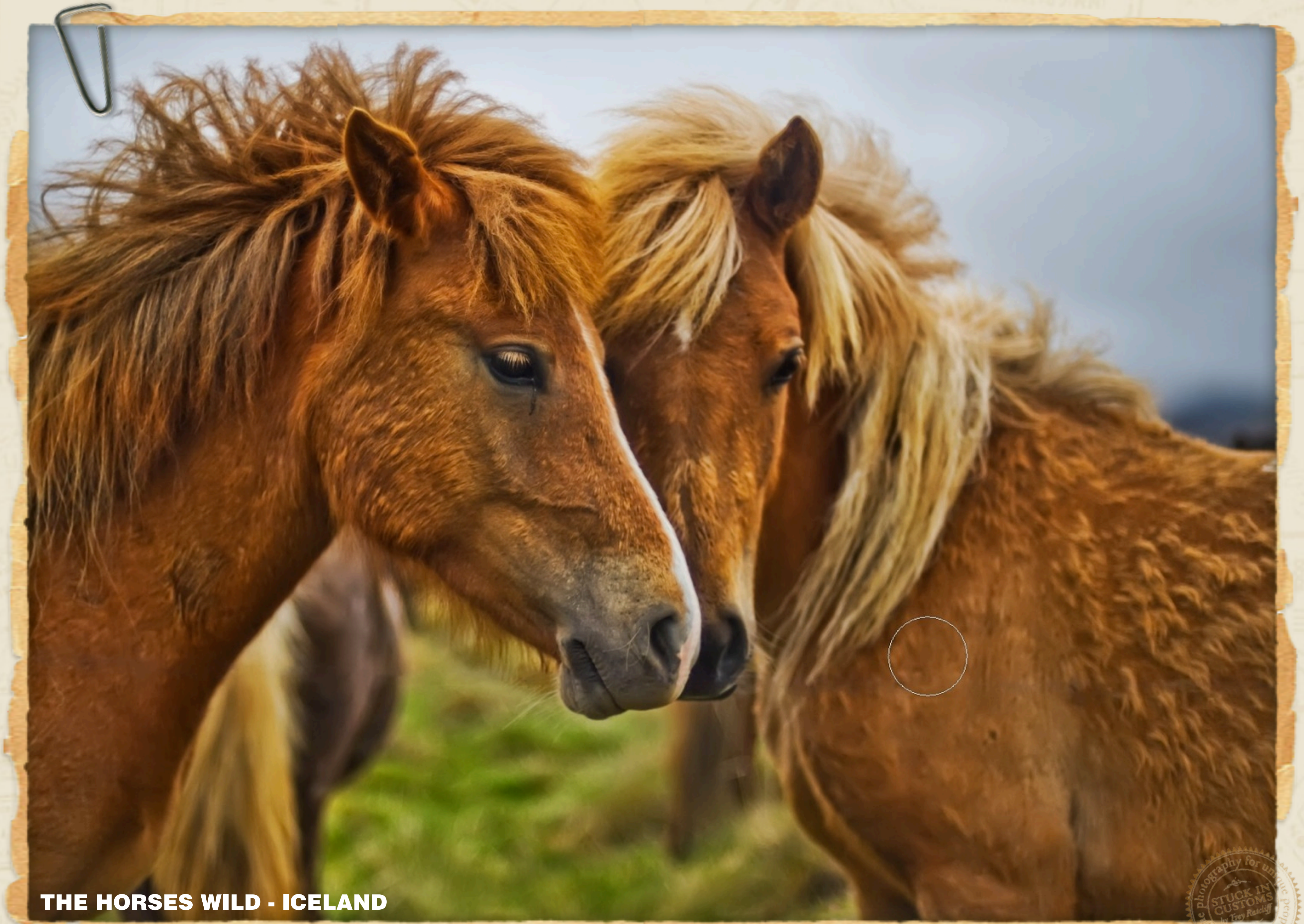


CHOOSING & CROPPING

There are certain times when you just can’t help but take a lot of photos. People deride this as “Spray & Pray.” Well, in action scenes, you just have to do your best. I recommend not going too crazy, but do controlled bursts. It makes editing a whole lot easier.

After you get home, you do indeed need to pick the best of the best. They all might be strong, but still, it behooves you to choose the best.

Here, you can see I have chosen my favorite one and then further cropped it along the lines of Phi. The next page shows the final image.



THE HORSES WILD - ICELAND

ALTERNATE BOOK COVERS

Even though this is a different sort of composition, I thought you might enjoy seeing some of the alternate (rejected) book covers for this eBook.   Note that many of these were rejected primarily because of the DragonLady.

COMPOSING THE PHOTO

CREATING ORDER FROM THE CHAOS - TREY RATCLIFF

COMPOSING THE PHOTO

HOW TO CREATE ORDER FROM THE CHAOS - TREY RATCLIFF

A BIG THANK YOU FROM THE RATCLIFF FAMILY!

I hope you enjoyed this eBook. Not only do they take a long time to make, but they have taken me many years of toil and expertise (and hundreds of mistakes!) to make this possible.

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